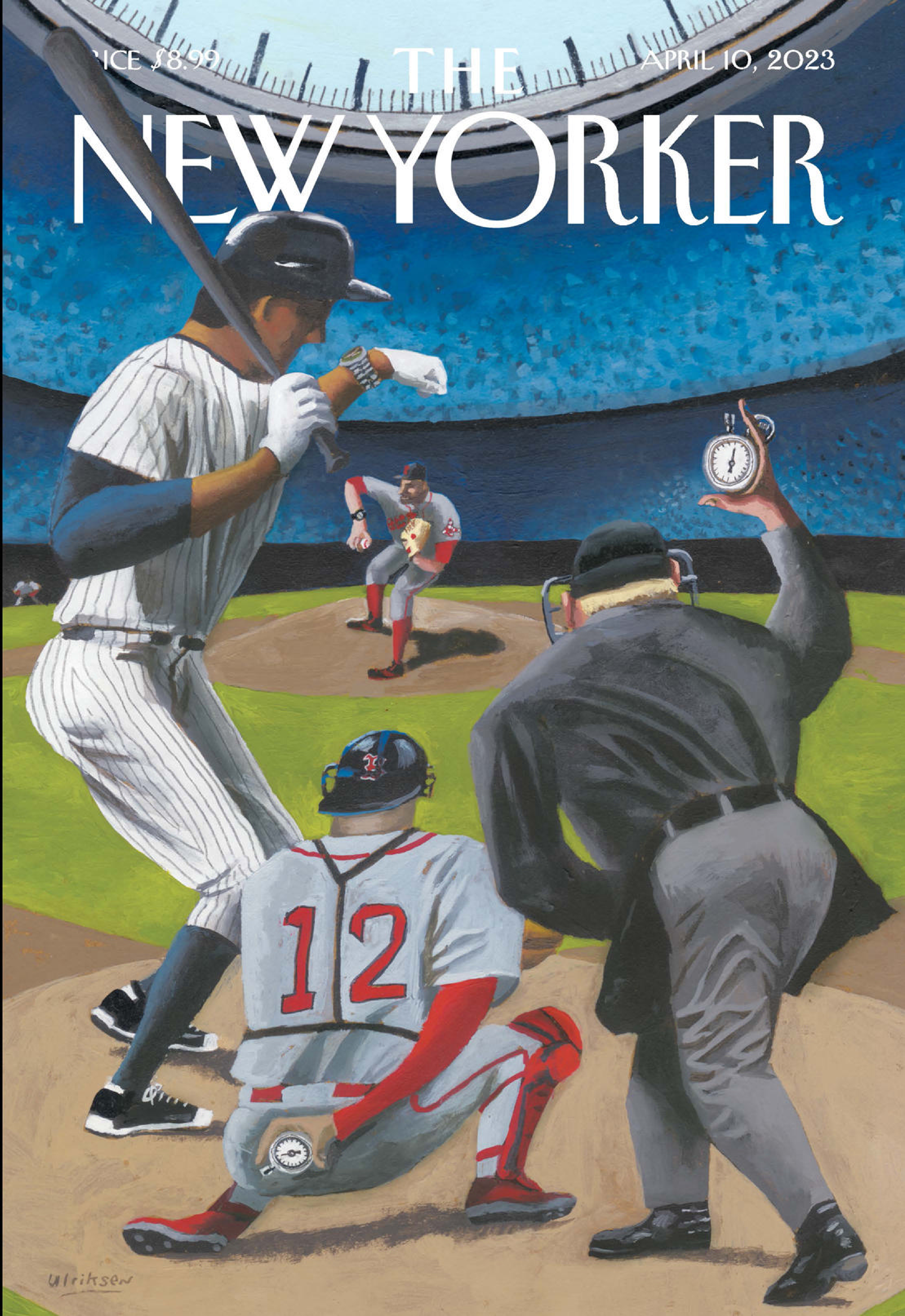
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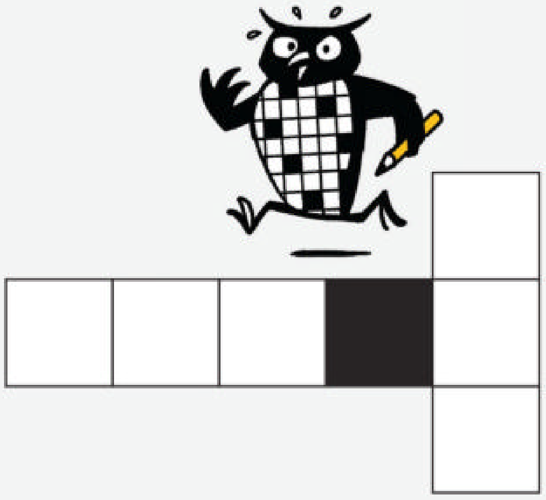
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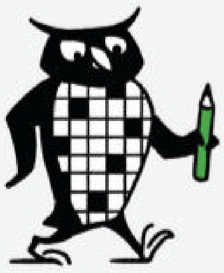
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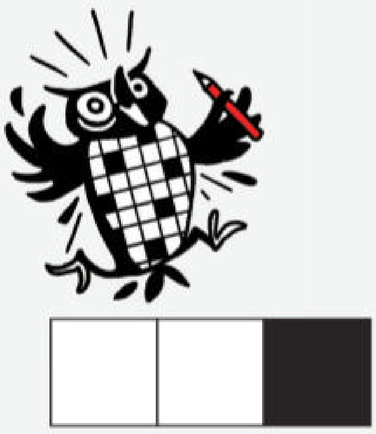




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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



ESSAY
Anna Holmes writes that her uterus has caused her nothing but misery—and yet she will be sad to lose it.



PHOTO BOOTH
Jon Lee Anderson reports on the complicated fight to save the Brazilian Amazon.

LEFT: ANNA PARINI; RIGHT: LARISSA ZAIDAN

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THE MAIL

HOW TO LOVE

It may be true that philosophy has little to say about marriage, but I don't think it follows, as the philosopher Agnes Callard says in Rachel Aviv's Profile of her, that we don't have "any inkling at all about how to live" ("Marriage of the Minds," March 13th). Both culture and religion have a great deal to say about marriage. Callard may feel that we are all simply copying one another's arbitrary behavior, but the popularity of advice columns such as "Dear Abby" is proof that people actually do think hard about how to do things differently and how to live more happily. For many people, marriage also has a sacramental aspect—it isn't just getting rings and going to a courthouse—and scripture and theology can be helpful guides.

Perhaps Callard is buying into a particular view of marriage, which Susan Sontag described as "an institution committed to the dulling of the feelings." But that hasn't been my experience, nor that of many happily married couples. To be married is to continuously experience change, and to get to know your spouse, your children (if you have any), and yourself ever more deeply, as all of you grow. In a way, every marriage is an experiment. Callard's desire to recognize this is admirable. But it isn't necessary to discover everything for yourself—there is much guidance out there, even if not from philosophy.

Nat Eddy
Deep River, Conn.

Although Callard "is often baffled by the human conventions that the rest of us have accepted," this bafflement suggests that she has not looked very far beyond the confines of her faculty lounge. I suggest that Callard put down her Aristotle and pick up a copy of Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy's book "The Ethical Slut" (now in its third edition), from which she would learn that, for at least the past quarter century, others have been researching, writing about, and living alternative relationship structures, including polyamory, ethical non-monogamy, relationship anarchy, couples living apart together, and other emerging approaches to family, friendship, domesticity, love, and sexuality.

P. J. Falzone
Brooklyn, N.Y.

SEEDS OF CHANGE

I thoroughly enjoyed Jill Lepore's report on seed catalogues ("Pay Dirt," March 20th). I first admired these gorgeous things while studying lithography in college, and have been growing back-yard gardens in Northern California ever since. By now, I get at least a dozen catalogues each year; they usually arrive when spring planting is still many rainy or frosty weeks ahead, and when it is tempting to succumb to the pizzazz of a dahlia with a novel palette or a heritage variety of beets.

I kept hoping, though, that Lepore would mention Landrace gardening, a traditional method popularized by Joseph Lofthouse, which involves saving the seeds of plants that make it through each season and thereby developing locally adapted varieties. Sixty per cent of commercial seeds are now distributed by four multinational chemical companies. Most are generally unsuited to the environments in which they will be grown, and require the kind of coddling that produces greater environmental and financial costs. By saving seeds from plants that survive under local weather and soil conditions, and forming seed banks in our own communities (think tiny libraries), we can select for the traits that make for the best adaptations. These are the seeds to plant the following year and to share with neighbors.

Dawn Hofberg-Schlosser
Albion, Calif.

•

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



When Alfred Stieglitz first saw Georgia O'Keeffe's drawings, in 1916, he was so impressed that he reportedly said, "At last, a woman on paper." On April 9, MOMA opens **"Georgia O'Keeffe: To See Takes Time,"** the first major exhibition devoted to the American modernist's output in charcoal, pastel, watercolor, and graphite, accompanied by a selection of her crowd-pleasing canvases. "An Orchid" (above), from 1941, a pastel-on-paper work mounted on board, is among the more than hundred and twenty pieces on view.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EVELYN FREJA

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

THE THEATRE

Bad Cinderella

At one point during the nearly two and a half hours of Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Bad Cinderella," a queen commands her all but shirtless, profligately muscled male attendants to drop and give her twenty pushups. They all comply at once, in unison, each working up a light sweat. That's what it's like to watch this new musical, with a book by Emerald Fennell and lyrics by David Zippel, under Laurence Connor's direction: it's a spectacle that shows its work at every step. The titular character (Linedy Genao) is a spiky orphan who refuses to buy into the superficial mores of her home town, Belleville. Her only friend is Prince Sebastian (Jordan Dobson), who has been made heir to the throne, against his will, after his elder brother's disappearance. You know the rest, more or less, even if you'd never anticipate the layers of camp, light fetish, and sexual innuendo that Webber and company bring to the telling.—*Vinson Cunningham (Imperial Theatre; open run.)*

Bob Fosse's Dancin'

Well, they certainly are dancin'. In that way, this revival of the 1978 revue "Bob Fosse's Dancin' " delivers exactly what its title promises. In most other ways, however, the show—featuring Fosse's choreography, plucked from productions that span his storied career, under the direction and musical staging of Wayne Cilento, who was a member of the show's original cast—struggles to find its footing. The dancers carry out Fosse's louche, handsy, by now archetypal steps well. But wrenching the choreography out of its origins in narrative makes for a strange mishmash, especially during an oddly angled medley of patriotic numbers (something about "Yankee Doodle Dandy" in this context raises the hair on one's neck) and a racially awkward rendering of "Mr. Bojangles." The occasional quote by Fosse, shouted by one or another dancer—or, even worse, recited in short acted-out scenes—only spotlights how vague and directionless the show is.—*V.C. (Music Box Theatre; open run.)*

The Coast Starlight

This new play by Keith Bunin—directed by Tyne Rafaeli, at Lincoln Center Theatre—asks its audience to consider a timeless counterfactual question: How might your life be different if you'd stopped and talked to that stranger? "The Coast Starlight" takes place during an almost thirty-five-hour-long ride on the Amtrak line of the same name, which follows the Pacific Coast up from Los Angeles to Seattle. TJ (Will Harrison) is a young man dead set on defecting from the armed services. One by one, we meet his fellow-passengers—played with empathy by Mia Barron, Camila Canó-Flaviá, Rhys Coiro, Jon Norman Schneider, and Michelle Wilson—all beset by troubles. We learn about them through monologues, and, occasionally, through dialogue that often repeats the phrase "I would have said." We glimpse how these travellers might have changed each other's lives, but actually don't. The show sometimes descends into schmaltz, but it has an unmistakable spark of compassion.—*V.C. (Mitzi E. Newhouse; through April 16.)*

Drinking in America

Andre Royo is an inescapably honest performer who coaxes out more inner truths the longer he's on a stage or a screen. In "Drinking in America," a one-man show in monologues by Eric Bogosian, from 1986, revived at the Minetta Lane Theatre under Mark Armstrong's direction, he plays a range of characters, all connected—it's right there in the title—by their all-American bombast and their temptations toward drink and other drugs. Royo is probably best known for his portrayal of the drug-addicted Bubbles on HBO's "The Wire," so he's had practice at holding his great charm in one hand and the ravages of addiction in the other. Some of Bogosian's sketches tend a bit heavily toward tropes—a fast-talking show-biz bottom-feeder, for example, or a business type who engages prostitutes because of his deep loneliness. At other times, Bogosian's writing and Royo's pathos take an archetype and spin it upward, toward a hilarious sublime.—*V.C. (Minetta Lane Theatre; through April 13.)*

DANCE

A.I.M / Kyle Abraham

In the decade since he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, Kyle Abraham has become a very busy man, with commissions rolling in at a relentless pace. Thus, it makes sense that his own company, A.I.M, has broadened its

ON TELEVISION



If there is a current bard of scattered, middle-age confusion, it's the actor Kathryn Hahn, who has, in the past decade—in the film "Afternoon Delight" and the series "I Love Dick" and "Mrs. Fletcher"—made forty-something meltdowns her métier. With her wild bramble of brunette hair and her elastic face, Hahn is adroit at playing both sensual and desperate, both lost and lusting after life. She brings these skills to bear in her new project, the Hulu series **"Tiny Beautiful Things,"** in which she plays a woman in crisis—estranged from her husband and daughter, still grieving her dead mother, and working a dead-end job—who finds a new purpose when she gets the opportunity to write an anonymous online advice column called "Dear Sugar." The story draws from the real-life experiences of the best-selling author Cheryl Strayed, who captured her solo walk along the Pacific Crest Trail in her memoir "Wild," from 2012. (Reese Witherspoon played Strayed in the 2014 film adaptation.) Hahn is the ideal choice to embody all of Strayed's contradictions—she's able to give glorious advice, but unable to navigate her own troubles—and the show, though sometimes too slow-moving, is a lovely glimpse into the making of a writer.—*Rachel Syme*

ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH MAZZETTI

JAZZ



Taking its name from a 1972 album by the saxophonist Archie Shepp, **"The Cry of My People,"** at BAM on April 8, is a celebration of African American culture. Curated by Solange Knowles and her collective, Saint Heron, as part of the "Eldorado Ballroom" series, the concert brings Shepp together with the vocalist Linda Sharrock and the writer Claudia Rankine, alongside an ensemble featuring the keyboardist Amina Claudine Myers. Shepp, Sharrock, and Myers all came of musical age during the ferment of the sixties, when jazz and social protest were intertwined. Shepp and Myers, both passionate musicians equally touched by gospel, blues, and avant-garde influences, have kept the fight alive across the ensuing decades. Sharrock, a shadow figure best known for her electrifying work with the late firebrand guitarist Sonny Sharrock (her former husband), is said to be giving her first New York performances since the seventies. Their collective message is one of solidarity, dignity, and endurance—of paramount importance in decades past, and no less urgent today.—*Steve Futterman*

scope to perform the works of other choreographers, including some by current and former A.I.M dancers. One of these, "Uproot: love and legacy," by Maleek Washington, about the bonds and energies that nestle within family groups, comes to the Joyce, as part of a mixed bill. Abraham brings back "Rain," a solo by the pioneering postmodern choreographer Bebe Miller, in which a woman, originally Miller herself, battles against a great weight. The lineup also includes Abraham's "Motor-Rover," a response to Merce Cunningham, and "Our Indigo: If We Were a Love Song," an exploration of love set to music by Nina Simone.—*Marina Harss (Joyce Theatre; April 4-9.)*

Faye Driscoll

Driscoll describes her latest work, "Weathering," as a "flesh sculpture." Many bodies, crammed together on a rotating platform that's squishy like a mattress, shift very slowly, all their bodily sounds amplified. Driscoll, a meticulous artist enamored of the id, has used configurations that look like games of Twister before. This time, the mode has a more serious, ecological spin. It's a bid to pay attention to tiny changes with huge consequences.—*Brian Seibert (New York Live Arts; April 6-8 and April 13-15.)*

Jonah Bokaer Choreography

Bokaer's company returns to New York City with an hour-long, one-night program, "Passing." His long-standing fascination with visual design continues with "Vesica Piscis," a collaboration with the designers threeASFOUR which features fashion-futuristic costumes and extended-reality video. "Fallen Angel," a solo for Bokaer, responds to the Rodin sculpture of the same name, setting the choreographer inside his own installation of ten weighty plinths.—*B.S. (Florence Gould Hall; April 6.)*

La MaMa Moves! Festival

The monthlong festival opens with two contrastive companies from Norway. Kari Hoaas offers the première of "Shadowland," which takes inspiration from the spare, shadowy lines of the visual artist Jan Groth, who died last year, for a subtle series of overlapping solos responding to loss. The performance group T.I.T.S., led by Nela H. Kornetová, brings "Forced Beauty," an over-the-top duet about the aestheticization of violence, in which two women battle for domination, spilling their Bloody Marys and wrestling topless.—*B.S. (La MaMa; April 6-30.)*

MUSIC

Alan Braxe

HOUSE "The Upper Cuts," a compilation by the Parisian house-music producers Alan Braxe and Fred Falke that's being reissued with extra tracks, first greeted the world in 2005, just as French house was gaining traction with a new generation thanks to Daft Punk and LCD Soundsystem. The "French touch" version of house, as exemplified by Braxe and Falke's work, is both garish and sly, with effulgent synthesizer lines smeared through layers of filtering and disco rhythms that are built on insistent eighth-note bass lines. At the music's most luminous, it's like skating on the rings of Saturn. This release party features d.j. sets from Braxe, the Dare, Orson, and Lauren Murada.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Le Bain at the Standard; April 7.)*

Shygirl

ELECTRONIC The d.j., singer, and rapper Shygirl is part of a class of young British artists who are transmuting electronic and pop music in pursuit of something that isn't wholly recognizable. In 2016, she co-founded the label and collective Nuxxe with the Irish d.j. and producer Sega Bodega and the French singer and producer Coucou Chloe, resolving to disrupt rigid genre binaries. Her singles with Arca and the late SOPHIE are glitchy, unpredictable vessels for monotone raps and sotto-voce singing. On "Alias," an EP inspired by her many alter egos, Shygirl let her impulses run amok, using her turntablist instincts to mix such disparate dance subgenres as house, Eurobeat, R. & B., and industrial music. But it wasn't until her début album, "Nymph," from last year, that she completely eroded the borders. As in a perfect club set, the record produces bits of fragmentary pop that feel nearly euphoric.—*Sheldon Pearce (Webster Hall; April 8-9.)*

"Tao of Glass"

MUSIC THEATRE For the Metropolitan Opera's company premières of Philip Glass's "Satyagraha" and "Akhnaten," in 2008 and in 2019, the British director and actor Phelim McDermott conjured mystical realms where Glass's incantatory music was free to weave its hypnotic spell. With "Tao of Glass," McDermott has written a semi-autobiographical play, with an original score by Glass, in which McDermott and an onstage ensemble of musicians and puppeteers tie together vignettes, inspirations, and preoccupations from his life. The piece touches on Taoism, flotation tanks, and, of course, a teen-age obsession with the Minimalist composer that has woven itself like a thread through McDermott's own art.—*Oussama Zahr (N.Y.U. Skirball; April 5-8.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD A. CHANCE

Wednesday

ROCK From alt-country to cowpunk to emo-country, American music has known innumerable augmenters of twang, ache, and forthright Southern storytelling. On its upcoming full-length, "Rat Saw God," the Asheville indie-rock quintet Wednesday merges the traditions of its upbringing with the tidal noise of shoegaze. Karly Hartzman's daring songwriting anchors Wednesday's gnarled, dreamlike sound; the recent single "Bath County" chronicles a trip to Dollywood and a parking-lot Narcan recovery, with allusions to the Drive-By Truckers and Loudon Wainwright III alongside clarifying screams. In celebration of "Rat Saw God," the band presents Mr. Rat's Flea Market, a daytime event that brings together independent artists offering records, zines, and other wares. Hartzman sells her handmade clothing—and, to cap off the festivities, takes the stage with Wednesday.—*Jenn Pelly (TV Eye; April 8.)*

Xylouris White

EXPERIMENTAL The indelible percussionist Jim White plays with a balletic flair, his arms floating like two dancers, while dressed less in the mode of a standard-issue rock drummer than of a rumpled attorney after a long night. The Australian-born New Yorker has been a transfixing staple of rhythm sections across various eras of indie rock, often as a busy freelancer supporting artsy singers such as Cat Power or Will Oldham. Those with fragile egos are advised to find a different beat or risk being overshadowed by a lowly drummer—yet there's no such fear in White's fruitful pairing with George Xylouris, the Cretan lute virtuoso. Xylouris White is a double-headed dazzler. The predominately instrumental duo's meditative new LP, "The Forest in Me," was recorded across continents—but, whether in patches of frenzy or of stillness, the musicians pull toward each other like magnets.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Le Poisson Rouge; April 6.)*

ART

Susan Hiller

"Rough Seas," a posthumous exhibition devoted to this artist's long-running fascination with postcards of the British coast—a tempestuously alluring genre of miniatures—reveals how conceptually fruitful a single subject can be when it's explored across nearly five decades. Hiller, who died in 2019, at the age of seventy-nine, was born in Florida and moved to the United Kingdom in the late nineteen-sixties. Initially, her gridded presentations of repurposed Edwardian-era images found in seaside junk shops served, in part, as monuments to the anonymous workers who had hand-tinted them. Later, Hiller sorted her source material thematically and enlarged the pictures, as seen in "Storm Scenes," from 2015, whose twelve pictures were hand-colored—with blue skies and flashes of pink atop sepia—by the artist herself. The nine-part "Rough Moonlit Nights," also from 2015, is a gloomy seduction: the postcards have all the Romantic angst and allure of a Caspar David Friedrich painting, their gloomy power undiminished by their mass-produced origins.—*Johanna Fateman (Lisson; through April 15.)*

"Signals: How Video Transformed the World"

Utopian visions mingle with dystopian nightmares in this ambitious exhibition about the video revolution—a global story of formal radicalism and political struggle. Thanks to the curators Stuart Comer and Michelle Kuo, "Signals" unfolds gracefully, albeit unchronologically, with careful consideration given to the inevitable demands on a viewer's time (and senses) that such a deluge of moving-image work presents. Near the beginning of the show, strong installations establish themes of media critique and spatial intervention. A fantastic piece by Gretchen Bender, from 1990, features a bank of monitors—stencilled with gnomic provocations such as "body ownership"—that screen television broadcasts; a wall-swallowing text painting by Martine Syms is accompanied by "Lessons I—CLXXX," from 2014-18, a computer-randomized montage of footage found on the Internet. Neither work has a real beginning or end, so visitors have no choice but to drop in and wander off. But other pieces here are feats of concision, including Song Dong's "Broken Mirror," from 1999, which employs the simple yet metaphorically rich visual trick of shattering one reflected image in order to reveal a second, concealed scene. Perhaps the starkest contrast on view is between early, optimistic experiments in interconnectivity and an array of works that capture mass protests and state violence, or illuminate the use of video for surveillance and disinformation. In the final gallery, a video by New Red Order (a self-described "public secret society" with a rotating membership), from 2020, deploys digital effects to imagine the repatriation of Indigenous objects, making a visually epic and powerfully trenchant statement.—*J.F. (Museum of Modern Art; through July 8.)*

AT THE GALLERIES



COURTESY THE ARTIST / GLADSTONE GALLERY

A photograph is always a collaboration between the people behind and in front of the camera. But the language we use to describe the process is predatory: a picture is "taken" or "shot." **LaToya Ruby Frazier,** one of the most consequential American photographers working today—the 2015 MacArthur Fellow will have a survey at MOMA next year—honors her subjects as collaborators, pairing her images of them with their own words in empowering projects that expose the ravages of government-sanctioned racism. When she looks through her lens, Frazier sees family, whether the bond is one of blood (as portrayed in her breakout series, a fourteen-year-long chronicle of life with her mother and grandmother in the Rust Belt town of Braddock, Pennsylvania) or of solidarity (her book "Flint Is Family in Three Acts," from 2020, documents the Michigan water crisis). Frazier's latest project, "More than Conquerors: A Monument for Community Health Workers of Baltimore, Maryland," on view at the Gladstone gallery through April 15, is making its New York City début after winning top honors at the Carnegie International, in Pittsburgh, last year. As its title suggests, it proposes a new form of monument, one that gives a voice to those on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.—*Andrea K. Scott*

MOVIES

The Music Room

Satyajit Ray's musical drama, from 1958, is a rapturous treasure trove of Indian classical music and dance—and a tale of the reckless passion that they can inspire. Biswambhar Roy (Chhabi Biswas), the hereditary landlord of a grand estate, has what his wife, Mahamaya (Padmadevi), calls "a dangerous addiction" to music. He neglects his business and spends himself into penury by holding private concerts with celebrated musicians in his home. The drama, unfolding in flashbacks, shows the tragic wreckage that results from his efforts to cultivate a similar love of music in his young son, Khoka (Pinaki Sengupta). Ray tells the story with flourishes of aestheticism—involving lavish architectural and ornamental detail—and hieratically refined performances that contrast ironically with the degradation resulting from Biswambhar's enthusiasm. The nine-minute-long climactic sequence features a great dancer (Roshan Kumari), performing to live accompaniment, who's filmed largely from a high angle, in front of a huge mirror that redoubles the action; it's uncomplicated yet visionary. Such ecstasies, alongside the family's ruin, present art as a disturbing, necessary luxury.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on the Criterion Channel, HBO Max, Prime Video, and other services.)*

Rye Lane

Sweetness prevails in this London-based romantic comedy, directed by Raine Allen-Miller, along with youthful exuberance, bright colors, jazzy angles, and an eerily perky positivity. Yas (Vivian Oparah) is a fashion buyer who wants to be a costume designer; Dom (David Jonsson) is an accountant who wants to be an accountant. She is free-spirited and energetic, he is straitlaced and nerdy; they meet at a friend's art exhibit, and, when she finds him miserable after a breakup, she rescues him from a humiliating encounter with his ex, thereby launching a fast friendship. But Yas, too, has recently endured a broken romance, which results in reckless antics with Dom at her ex's place. The obstacles that Dom and Yas face in their own relationship are as conventional and clunky as hurdles on a track, and the frictionless cultural realm that they inhabit suggests that Britain has overcome all conflicts and divisions by way of good food, good music, and good vibes. The able cast can't quite transcend the script's clichés.—*R.B. (Streaming on Hulu.)*

ON THE BIG SCREEN



Kelly Reichardt's latest drama, **"Showing Up,"** which opens on April 7—the story of Lizzy (Michelle Williams), a sculptor in Portland, Oregon, who's preparing to exhibit at a local gallery—is an instant classic of a life in art. Reichardt, who wrote the script with Jon Raymond, invests the film's meticulously observed action with a quiet yet passionate grandeur. Lizzy has a day job in the office of an art college—her boss is her mother, Jean (Maryann Plunkett)—and has too little time for her exquisite work, small clay statues of women. Her self-absorbed friend and neglectful landlord, Jo (Hong Chau), makes more spectacular art and has two prestigious shows opening at the same time. Lizzy's vain father (Judd Hirsch), a retired potter, and her troubled brother (John Magaro), who is mentally ill, require her attention; amid her efforts to be both a good person and a good artist, her gruff and terse candor is a bulwark against frustration and distraction. Working with the cinematographer Christopher Blauvelt, Reichardt films as if in a state of rapt attention, reserving her keenest ardor and inspiration for the art itself: as Lizzy sculpts and assembles and glazes and even just ponders, the film's visual contemplations seem to get deep into Lizzy's creative soul.—*Richard Brody*

Turn the River

The actor Chris Eigeman wrote and directed this 2008 drama, and the result is small, patient, and uninterruptedly sad. Famke Janssen plays Kaylie, a pool hustler with almost nothing to live on and even less to live for; her only hope is her son, Gulley (Jaymie Dornan), who was taken from her as a baby, and with whom she is forbidden to have contact. Nevertheless, they keep in touch, writing letters to each other and using Quinn (Rip Torn), the grizzled owner of a New York pool hall, as a go-between. The movie looks pretty grim, and the games themselves are rarely choreographed with clarity or crispness; yet, thanks to Janssen—exemplary in the depiction of despair—we sense the momentum in Kaylie's needs as she plots to spirit Gulley away from the grasp of his father (Matt Ross), who once trained as a minister and now puts his faith in alcohol and anger. The story loses its way, and some of its credibility, toward the end, but that seems easy to forgive when so much of it has scraped so close to the bone.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 5/12/08.) (Streaming on Tubi, Crackle, and other services.)*

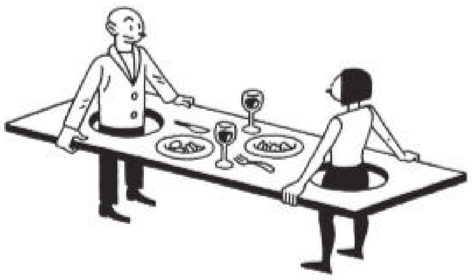
Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?

With a cartoon-like comic genius that's on view from the very first shot, which features Tony Randall as a master of ceremonies with tenuous control of movie magic, the director Frank Tashlin lampoons TV, Hollywood, advertising, corporate life, and domestic order—in short, he sends everything up in order to peek at what's hidden underneath. Randall also stars as Rockwell P. Hunter, a copywriter who, in trying to win an endorsement for his ad agency, gets mistaken for a starlet's "lover doll" and finds his sudden tabloid fame transformative. Jayne Mansfield plays the celebrity, Rita Marlowe, who squeals at the sight of a serviceable man but always has one hand on the wheel of her personal fortune. Tashlin packs the soundtrack with ribald riffs and fills the frame with Freudian gags (the story climaxes in the firm's executive washroom) but also stays thematically on target: the movie spotlights the self-consuming, self-perpetuating echoes of mass media and their jangling yet liberating amplification of private, intimate matters. Released in 1957.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel, Prime Video, and other services.)*

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TABLES FOR TWO

Casa Margaritas

247-63 Jericho Turnpike, Queens

PHOTOGRAPH BY EVAN ANGELASTRO FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

To order most any dish at Casa Margaritas, a new restaurant on the eastern edge of Queens which serves mainly Colombian food, is to marvel at its size or at all that comes with it—and sometimes both. When I asked for the tostones with guacamole and chicharrón, I imagined something dainty: a few coins of fried green plantain, a restrained sprinkling of crumbled pork rind. What arrived were glorious smashed disks the size of my palm, golden, salty, and crisp, spread thickly with lush, whipped avocado and blanketed in fat, crunchy lardons of pork belly.

A "small" bowl of soup was as hearty as could be—a thin, fragrant broth flecked with cilantro and packed with hunks of beef that looked firm but collapsed into supple shreds at the mere touch of a spoon, plus soft morsels of potato, yucca, and plantain. This could have been a meal on its own but was presented as the centerpiece of a feast, rounded out by white rice, lightly slicked with oil, *maduros* (caramelized sweet plantains), and a salad of shredded romaine, carrot, pickled red onion, tomato, and thinly sliced apple, drizzled in a cilantro-lemon dressing.

The dish that most exemplifies this theme of bounty is the *bandeja típica*, the restaurant's iteration of the *bandeja paisa*, the unofficial national dish of Colombia. *Paisa* refers to a population of Colombians in a northwest region of the country which includes Medellín, the capital of the Antioquia province and the home town of the Lopéz-Castaño family, the owners of Casa Margaritas. Their *bandeja* gave me serious wanderlust for a city where one could eat like this every day: a large oval plate is packed to its edges with a sheet of carne asada (thinly pounded sirloin); a hefty rasher of fatty, crackly chicharrón, scored into bite-size cubes; sliced avocado; a small grilled arepa; a mound of rice, topped with a perfect fried egg; and a scoop of pinto beans, gone creamy with starch.

If you wanted, for some reason, to supersize this, you could opt for the *bandeja de la casa*, which adds to the *típica* (minus the egg and avocado) a quarter of a rotisserie chicken, a slab of grilled pork loin, and French fries. If you wanted to streamline, in terms of meat (and, in my experience, meat, rather than seafood, is the thing to get here), you could get the *entraña*—glistening, ropy fillets of umami-rich grilled skirt steak accompanied by a vivid-green chimichurri, plus grilled potato, rice, and beans. To treat those beans as the main event, you could order the *frijolada*, for which they're mixed with *hogao*—also known as *salsa criolla*, or Creole sauce, made with tomato and green onion—and you'll still get rice, chicharrón, *maduros*, avocado, and an arepa. (This arepa, made of white corn, is quite plain, bearing just a hint of smoky char; don't miss the vastly more exciting *arepitas de choclo*, made with sweet corn and topped with guacamole, pico de gallo, and shredded beef.)

If you wanted to eat Mexican food, you could do that, too. When the Lopéz-Castaños started to conceive of the restaurant, they knew they'd want to outfit the bar with a frozen-margarita machine, which had been a big draw at restaurants they'd co-owned in Jackson Heights. To close the gap between margaritas and Colombian food, and to appeal to an even broader clientele in their new neighborhood—Bellerose, a stone's throw from Nassau County, on a block of a major thoroughfare that feels almost quaint, thanks to a stretch of storybook architecture—they added burritos, enchiladas, and tacos to the menu. The margaritas are many, available in flavors including passion fruit, guava, and lulo (also known as naranjilla, a citrusy fruit native to South America), or mixed with prosecco or Corona. Among the desserts is a wedge of luscious house-made flan, as Mexican as it is Colombian, with a squiggle of whipped cream and a cherry on top. *(Dishes $5.50-$38.95.)*

—*Hannah Goldfield*


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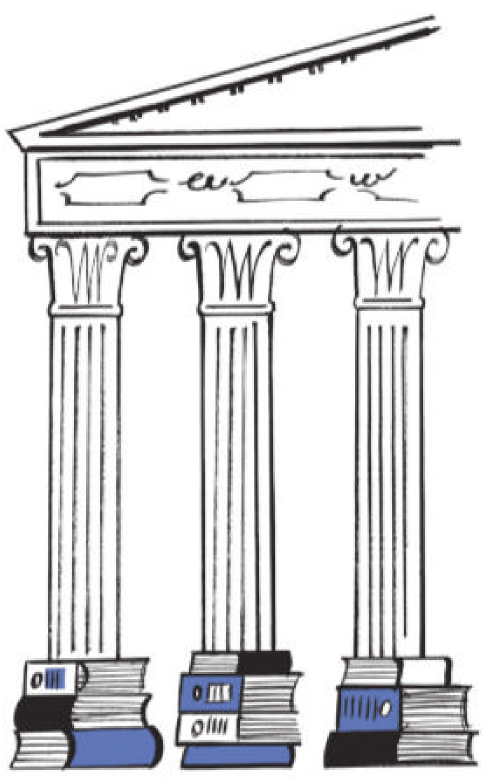


THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
DEMOCRACY CALLING

In the years since Donald Trump first campaigned for the Presidency, he has come under investigation for all sorts of offenses, impeachable and otherwise, and whenever so pressured he has always sought to get back to the trail. Shortly after the November midterms, when the Republican landslide failed to materialize and the news focus returned to the various state and federal investigations currently pending against him, Trump, who had long contested the 2020 Presidential election, announced his 2024 campaign, and then set out for the hustings. Maybe he thought that the crowds, and a reminder of his influence with them, would have a protective effect. On March 25th, just days after Trump said that he would soon be arrested, following an indictment in New York, he restarted his 2024 campaign with a rally in Waco, Texas. The location itself was a nod to those who distrust the government, and the rally became a fulmination against the Justice Department. For Trump, soliciting votes and issuing threats to the legitimacy of the democratic process are now often the same thing. Having earlier called the Manhattan District Attorney, Alvin Bragg, "corrupt," Trump also warned of "potential death and destruction" if he was indicted.

If the threats were meant to stave off a prosecution, they didn't work. Last Thursday, Trump was indicted, and he is due to be arraigned on Tuesday by Bragg's prosecutors. No former President of the United States has ever before faced criminal charges; Trump will reportedly face more than two dozen. Much about the case is still unknown—the indictment will likely remain sealed until the arraignment—but Bragg's team had been investigating payments to the former adult-film actor Stormy Daniels during the 2016 campaign, allegedly made to keep her from publicly revealing that she'd slept with Trump while he was married. (He has denied the sex and any campaign-related wrongdoing.) This isn't the gravest of the investigations into Trump—others concern election interference, mishandling of classified materials, and inciting the January 6th insurrection—and we know little about the defense that his lawyers will mount. But if the indictment doesn't settle the larger matters of Trump's guilt or innocence, or calibrate the political effect of the charges against him, it does mean that the Trump show will now have to move to a courtroom.



One effect of Trump's campaigns against the soundness of the investigations and the legitimacy of the 2020 election has been to supply Joe Biden with what has become a favored theme: the need to fortify democratic institutions against would-be authoritarians at home and actual authoritarians abroad. (Vladimir Putin's war of conquest in Ukraine, and the widespread horror it has provoked, provided a push, too.) As it happened, President Biden spent much of last week holding a virtual Summit for Democracy to advance this theme. There were breakout sessions at which heads of state discussed challenges to democracies such as corruption and misinformation, and a digital parade in which many of the most powerful people in the world—Emmanuel Macron, Volodymyr Zelensky, Biden himself—gave brief speeches in which they insisted that democratic countries shared not just a mechanism of government but also an ethos.

The President of Cyprus, Nikos Christodoulides, quoted Aristotle: "Democracy arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects." Maybe that line was just copied and pasted from an aide's Word document: Open if in need of idealism. But Biden, in his own remarks, stressed that this kind of democratic idealism was on the rebound. The President said that he had organized the first such summit, in 2021, in response to the charge that "democracy's best days were behind it." Now, he said, that charge has been answered: "It's working. It's working."

Is democracy on the rebound? The situation is a little murkier than the President might like, both at home and

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

abroad. Even among the leaders who appeared at the summit offering testimonies to liberal democracy, there were some clear cases of hypocrisy. Among the first to speak was the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, who had just seen his most prominent political rival sent to jail for two years, on a flimsy-sounding charge of defamation. "The liberal democratic values in India's constitution continue to be a beacon of hope for others," Modi said. About an hour after him, the camera cut to the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who sounded slightly impatient. He said, "Israel is, and will always remain, a liberal democracy. With equal rights for all." Netanyahu, of course, is in the midst of a campaign to gut the power of the Israeli judiciary, the institution that guarantees those rights, even as he himself is on trial for charges of fraud, bribery, and breach of trust (charges that he denies). That authoritarian power grab has triggered mass protests and a general strike, walkouts by military reservists, and even talk about the possibility of civil war. Among other slogans, the Israeli protesters chanted, "Democracy or revolt."

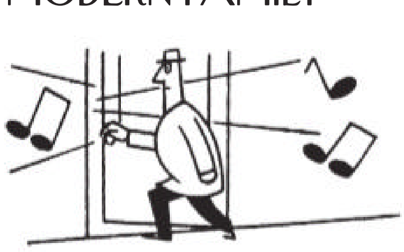
The fact that the situation isn't quite so dire in the United States owes a lot to the result of the 2020 election, to the courts that rejected challenges to it, and to the sturdiness of the election officials whom Trump tried to pressure to overturn it. He may still have to answer for that effort. Fani Willis, the D.A. in Georgia's Fulton County, is investigating Trump's efforts to get election officials in that state to "find" (as he was recorded saying) more than eleven thousand nonexistent votes that would throw the Presidency to him. It is that case and the investigations that federal prosecutors in Washington, D.C., are pursuing that most directly involve an assault on democracy, and whose stakes seem most obviously high.

But theoretical distinctions between the cases about Trump's challenges to the constitutional order and one that seems to center on hush money may not matter much on the ground. In the hours after news of the indictment broke, Republicans once more closed ranks around Trump, denouncing Bragg for making a political decision rather than a prosecutorial one. Ron DeSantis said that, as Governor of Florida, where Trump now primarily resides, he would not honor any request for extradition. (Trump's lawyers had previously said that he would surrender for arraignment, though, so the talk about extradition may have been just a political ploy.)

It was naïve to think that a case involving lesser crimes might elicit a more subdued political reaction. Instead, the situation is not so dissimilar from the aftermath of the 2020 election, in which an unfathomable kind of political pressure rested on the precision of the evidence presented and on the fairness of the conduct of the case—the sorts of mundane bureaucratic acts that sustain a democracy.

—Benjamin Wallace-Wells

RETROSPECTIVE
MODERN FAMILY

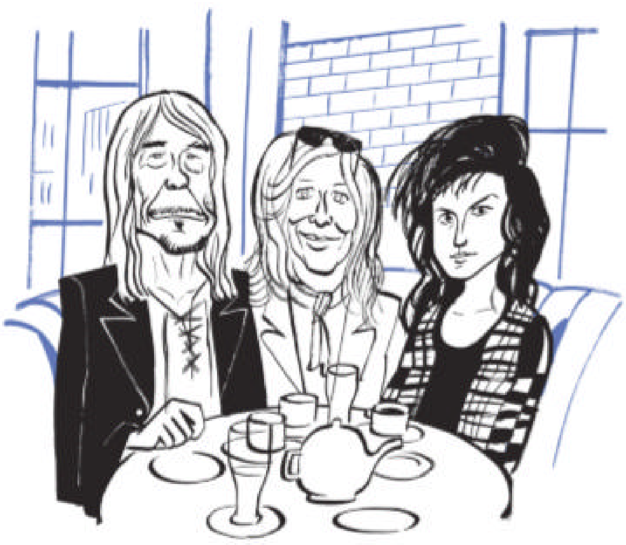


At the restaurant in the Roxy, a retro rock-and-roll-style boutique hotel in Tribeca, the singer David Johansen sat in a booth alongside his wife, Mara Hennessey, and his stepdaughter, Leah Hennessey. Johansen, who is seventy-three, wiry, and gravelly-voiced, is the onetime lead singer of the pathbreaking proto-punk band the New York Dolls, and has also been known over the years for his alter ego, the bouffant-wearing showman Buster Poindexter. Mara, a fifty-nine-year-old artist with ice-blue tresses and a dreamy affect, was listening to Leah, who had just rushed in from editing an HBO Max special she is co-directing for the comedian John Early. Leah, who is thirty-four and dark-haired, said, "We have a shot that's a joke on the last scene of 'Shine a Light,' the Scorsese Stones documentary, and I'm playing Scorsese."

The Martin Scorsese reference was apropos. During the pandemic, Leah—who, besides directing, writing, and acting, also has a band and has modelled for Celine—was entrusted by the director to conduct and film a series of interviews with Johansen, who has been in her life since she was nine, before he and her mother became a couple. The footage was used in the documentary "Personality Crisis: One Night Only," which is co-directed by Scorsese and David Tedeschi and premières on Showtime this month.

The core of the documentary is a series of shows that Johansen performed at the Café Carlyle in early 2020. The concept was Poindexter does the Johansen songbook rather than the lounge-lizardy covers he generally croons. Interspersed with this footage are the interviews that Leah shot, in which Johansen ruminates on his life and times.

"I usually don't participate in documentaries where I need to be interviewed, like, about the history of punk," Johansen, who was wearing a tan lace-up crocheted shirt under a black blazer, said. "Every time I do one, I come out like an absolute idiot." He smiled. "It's like the cat's out of the bag."



David Johansen, Mara Hennessey, and Leah Hennessey

"You know, Cary Grant was like that," Leah said. She had on a plaid Marni cardigan and a plaid silk skirt. "He said that if he did interviews he was afraid people would realize he was stupid."

"They have a lot in common, David and Cary Grant," Mara, in a linen jacket and her mother's silk scarf, said. "They both look so great the minute they wake up."

Mara raised Leah on the Upper West Side. "I was really alone-alone," she said. "No child support, no weekends off."

"And she was, like, a hot single mom with a cool kid," Leah said. "So there were all kinds of guys. But the suitors were just turned away."

"Nobody passed the boyfriend test with me," Mara agreed.

Until Johansen. "We were friends for a few years before we realized we were in love," Mara said. "I mean, other people knew, but we didn't know it."

"It's hard to describe love," Johansen broke in, flippant but fond. "The poets have tried and tried." A dozen pigs in blankets arrived at the table. "Hey, wait, these are just hot dogs!" he said.

"At first, David was, like, 'I'm not going to be Leah's dad, I'm going to be her friend,'" Mara said. "But then at some point Leah started referring to us as her parents."

"Leah is very intelligent and fun, like her mother," Johansen said. "There was nothing about her that I didn't like."

"He became part of our world really naturally," Mara said. "He was interested in life in the same way we were. We'd go to Central Park, walk around aimlessly, make up stories, talk about how everything smells and feels, make friends with dogs. Leah would talk and talk."

The chattiness was not an impediment to the "Personality Crisis" interview process. "I was able to get a word in edgewise," Johansen said. "We had a very nice conversation."

"The best piece of advice Scorsese gave me at the beginning of shooting was 'Just because he's your dad doesn't mean he's going to tell you anything he doesn't want to tell you,'" Leah said. "'Let him give you what he wants to give you.'"

But there were some revelations. "There was something you told me that I never really understood about you," Leah told Johansen. "About how, when you opened for Pat Benatar in stadium shows, you felt like a bug. Like, diminished and insecure."

"You were, like, 'Like a bug?' And I was, like, 'Yeah, like a bug!'" Johansen said.

"I always saw you as detached and confident and, like, water-off-a-duck's-back. And, if *I* felt not good enough, I didn't think you'd understand," Leah said. "And then to see this little glimmer of, like, 'I felt bad about that, playing for these people who weren't there to see me . . .'" She looked at Johansen affectionately. "It was very moving."

—*Naomi Fry*

TEST KITCHEN
CLOSE SHAVE



At Astor Place Hairstylists the other day, a businessman and a barber sat around talking razors. Electric, disposable, Harry's, Schick, safety, straight: "It's a three-billion-dollar industry!" Jonathan Trichter, the businessman, said. "When Gillette came out with the Mach 3, they put seven hundred fifty million into manufacturing and development. It took seven years." Joel Valle, the barber, had constructed his first prototype—"a bendable razor blade!"—in prison, for the cost of a can of soda. "We'll roll it out here. We'll be the test kitchen," Trichter said. "Then we'll sell direct to consumers!"

Trichter, a former banker with J. P. Morgan, bought the barbershop two years ago, after the Vezza family, its owner for about seventy-five years, announced during the pandemic that they were closing it. "It couldn't be like a vulture came in and picked it up," Trichter said. "I could not look like a scumbag. So I probably overpaid." He wore a made-to-measure suit over a monogrammed shirt. The purchase was more about fame than about fortune. "It'll be the first line of my obituary," he said.

Valle held up a handmade straight razor whose handle was studded with plastic gems. It had a bendable blade, curved like a scythe. Trichter looked at Valle and said, "You can step in if you want, but I'm gonna tell your story." He went on, "So . . . he did a five-year stint in the federal penitentiary for cocaine—"

"One thousand one hundred seventy-three grams," Valle interjected. "I thought it was the end of my life. But it was the best thing that happened. I wouldn't have come up with the idea of the razor." He elaborated: "The only thing you have to play with in there is the trash." At first, Valle, who is tattooed from head to toe ("Dick, balls, ass—I'm tatted up!" he said), melted down plastic (toothbrushes, water-bottle caps) to make a knife. "Anything could happen at any time," he explained. "Thank God I didn't have to use it."

Before long, he started applying his ingenuity to matters of grooming. He crushed the graphite from pencils and mixed it with baby powder to make



hair dye. He offered facial treatments (toothpaste mixed with Noxzema and sliced cucumbers) to lifers in their cells. One day, a guard asked what was going on. An incarcerated man replied, "This mothafucka turned this place into a spa!"

Valle had started out cutting the hair of local fishermen, in Puerto Rico, when he was nine; by 2006, he was giving trims to Newark's mayor Cory Booker. "My entire life, I was gonna be a barber," Valle said. After his drug arrest, in 2013, he began working as a jailhouse hair stylist. One problem: scissors were hard to come by at the Metropolitan Detention Center, where he landed before being sent to a maximum-security prison in Pennsylvania. But he had an idea. By attaching a razor blade to a comb, he made his own razor-comb, and soon he was blending fades like a pro. The guys paid him in packs of tuna. "I was eating every day like a king," he said. He noticed that some prison barbers were using nail clippers; others used toothbrushes as combs. People loved that Valle did things differently. (Reached by phone, one of his former clients, who is currently at the Pennsylvania prison where Valle did time, said, "He can cut hair real good, yes indeed.")

Valle went on, "Everybody's got visitation. Everybody's gotta look good for family. If you're somebody that can make that man look good, that man will kill for you in there."

In prison, a close shave is a different matter entirely. Valle had another idea. He would remove the blades from plastic disposables and hold them carefully in his fingers to give precision shaves. Next, he tried using his prison I.D. card as a handle. In 2015, he perfected his masterpiece, which he called the "Go 2 Razzor."

He demonstrated the gizmo on a customer. "This is what barbers have been using for more than a hundred years," he said, holding up a box of Derby professional chromium-ceramic-platinum-tungsten blades. He shook his head. He picked up a pair of scissors and cut into a ginger-ale can, then folded a square of aluminum around one of the razor blades. By gripping the aluminum, he could bend the blade into different arcs. The result? The O.G. version of his patent-pending bendable razor blade. (He and Trichter plan to split the profits.) "With this, I used to make the saddest man in prison happy," he said.

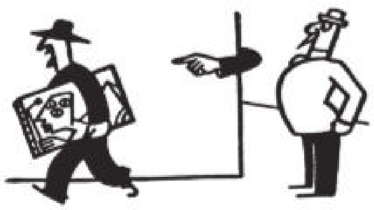
Trichter said, "Inmate innovation!"

"The bending is what makes it different," Valle added. "It can adjust to any facial structure!"

Trichter watched nervously as the customer got the closest shave of his life. After Valle wiped off the lather, he plugged his side hustle. "I also sell Frenchies—French bulldogs," he said. "I've got, like, twenty. You want me to bring you one?"

—Adam Iscoe

THE PICTURES
ART'S SAKE



"Working on this film, we weren't just building a set but building a character," the curator Leonardo Bigazzi said the other day. He was at a downtown gallery to attend the opening of a show by Francesco Clemente, and the film he was talking about was "Inside," which stars Willem Dafoe as an art thief who gets trapped, mid-heist, in a New York City penthouse when its security system malfunctions. A few years ago, Bigazzi, a forty-one-year-old Florentine, was approached by a producer to help with the details. Would Bigazzi pick out the art works that become the thief's only companions?

All alone in the Manhattan high-rise, the burglar, Nemo (that's Nobody, in Latin), begins to go mad. (He's not so different from the Green Goblin, the character Dafoe played in "Spider-Man.") Nemo's mark, a Pritzker-winning architect, is in Kazakhstan, apparently working on something called the Tulip Tower. "The antagonist is never there, apart from in Nemo's dreams or hallucinations," Bigazzi said. "But a collection is the physical manifestation of the obsessions, the passions, the loves, the encounters of a collector."

Bigazzi retired to a back room and sat on a blue velvet couch. Vasilis Katsoupis, the film's director, joined him. A large pinkish painting hung on the wall behind them. Bigazzi, who is tall, with wavy hair, wore Gucci brogues; Katsoupis, a kindly-looking man with a beard, was in sensible oxfords. "This idea came to me when I first visited New York, in 2010," Katsoupis, who is forty-six, said. "I was very impressed by how high the buildings were, and I thought, What if someone is trapped on the top floor?" He developed the idea of an urban Robinson Crusoe, marooned in the sky. "You can see people walking by, cars, helicopters, but nobody can see you," he said. "It becomes torturous, because you have a voice, but nobody can hear you."

Like any good castaway, Nemo—who is perhaps more Friday than Crusoe—splits his time between planning an escape and surviving. The plumbing has been shut off, so he collects water from an automated houseplant-irrigation system. He works his way through the owner's supplies of foie gras and caviar, and tries not to look at the cans of dog food in the pantry. As he searches for exits, certain art works draw his eye. Katsoupis had initially thought that "Christina's World," by Andrew Wyeth, would represent Nemo's longing for escape, but he and Bigazzi realized that it was implausible to have the picture be part of someone's private collection: everyone knows it's at MOMA. Instead, they commissioned a similarly evocative watercolor from Clemente, and chose thirty-seven other pieces, by such artists as Maurizio Cattelan and Joanna Piotrowska. Nemo variously ignores or



Willem Dafoe and Leonardo Bigazzi

defaces many of them, but he cherishes a few, including the Clemente.

Once the collection was assembled, reproductions—or, in a few cases, the real things—were placed around the set. So that Dafoe wouldn't have to act in front of a green screen, Katsoupis had oligarch's-eye-view footage of New York, shot at different times of day, projected onto the walls, mimicking floor-to-ceiling windows.

Dafoe, who is sixty-seven, came in and sat down next to Bigazzi. Although he lived in SoHo for years, he isn't too bothered about the glass-clad towers that have sprung up in the area. "I try not to get too sentimental," he said. "What goes up must come down!" As for the art works, he had enjoyed playing against them. "They're good partners," he said. "When Nemo gets closed in, he can admire the pieces for a while, but they're worthless to him, because all he wants to do is eat and drink." He stretched a leg in the air and flexed his foot, so that his heel pointed at the ceiling; with his long mustache, he looked like a circus acrobat. "Then he sits with them, which is the proper way to see art, I suppose. That's where all the questions come in: What is our feeling about art, you know? How useless is it? How useful is it, how decadent is it?"

The owner of the gallery, Vito Schnabel, whose father, Julian, directed Dafoe in his van Gogh bio-pic, a few years back, poked his head in to say hello. "Big crowd, baby," Dafoe said. Clemente came in, too.

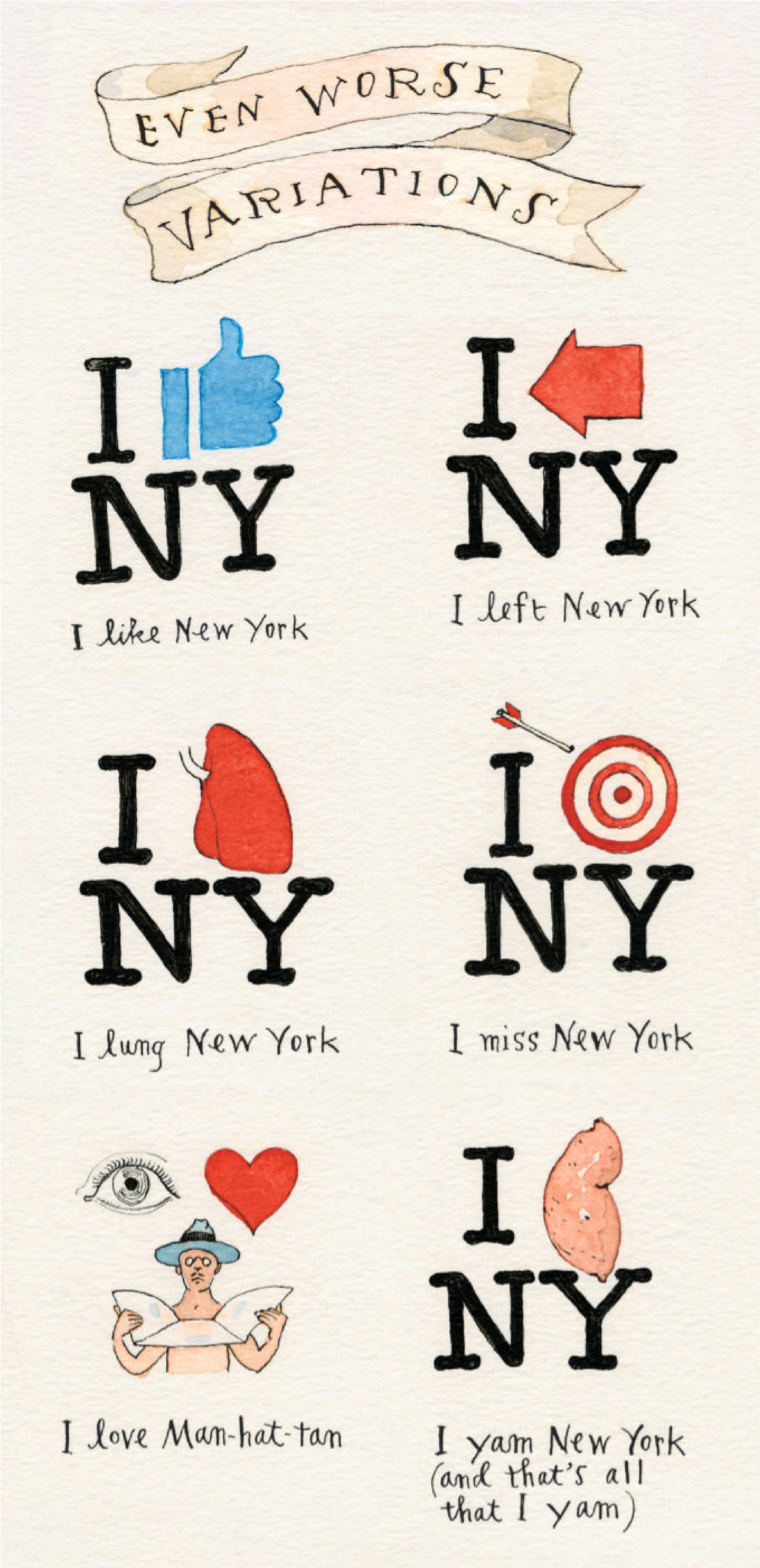
"I'm the painter!" he said. "It's all on the wall."

In "Inside," Nemo eventually starts drawing on the walls. Dafoe learned to paint for his role as a counterfeiter in the 1985 movie "To Live and Die in L.A." He gave his first painting, a demonic figure in oils, to Kathryn Bigelow, who had directed him in his first leading role, in "The Loveless," in 1981, but the canvases kept piling up.

"I used to repaint them, paint over them, rework stuff all the time," he said. "But it got to a point where it really felt like they were done. And what do I do? I'm not going to give them to friends!" He laughed. "I love the act of it. But, when it's sitting there, it's like: Dilettante! Burn 'em all!"

—*Fergus McIntosh*

SKETCHPAD BY BARRY BLITT



ANNALS OF EDUCATION

THE CITADEL

Hillsdale College's battle for the soul of American education.

BY EMMA GREEN



Conservative movements to reform education are often defined by what they're against. At a recent public briefing, the governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, decried the imposition of critical race theory and mandatory diversity-and-inclusion training at the state's schools. He pledged to counter "ideological conformity" and "administrative bloat." On the other hand, when DeSantis and other Republican politicians try to articulate what they're for—what exactly they want education to look like—one name comes up repeatedly: Hillsdale College. DeSantis has said that he probably wouldn't hire someone from his alma mater, Yale. But "if I get somebody from Hillsdale," he said, "I know they have the foundations necessary to be able to be helpful in pursuing conservative policies." In January, DeSantis's chief of staff told *National Review* that the governor hoped to transform New College of Florida, a public liberal-arts school, into a "Hillsdale of the South." One of the people involved in implementing the reforms is a dean and vice-president at Hillsdale.

Hillsdale College, a school in southern Michigan with roughly sixteen hundred students, was founded by abolitionist, Free Will Baptist preachers in 1844. Today, the college is known as a home for smart young conservatives who wish to engage seriously with the liberal arts. The Hillsdale education has several hallmarks: a devotion to the Western canon, an emphasis on primary sources over academic theory, and a focus on equipping students to be able, virtuous citizens. There is no department of women's and gender studies, no concentrations on race and ethnicity. It's a model of education that some scholars consider dangerously incomplete. It's also a model that communities across the country are looking to adopt.

In the past two decades, Hillsdale has vastly expanded its influence, partly through its ties to Republican politics. The college has had a presence in Washington, D.C., for fifty years, and in 2010 it opened a second campus there, largely for graduate students, in a row of town houses across from the Heritage Foundation. The faculty includes Michael Anton, the former Trump Administration official known for his essay "The Flight 93 Election," in which he wrote that voting for Donald Trump was the only way to save America from doom, and David Azerrad, a former Heritage Foundation director who has described America as being run on a system of "Black privilege." In recent years, speakers at Hillsdale events have included Justices Clarence Thomas and Amy Coney Barrett, then a circuit-court judge. Thomas, whose wife, Virginia, once served on the Hillsdale Board of Trustees, has referred to the college as "a shining city on a hill." Alumni have gone on to serve in powerful government positions: Kevin McCarthy's former deputy chief of staff, three Supreme Court clerks from the last term, and speechwriters for the Trump Administration all attended Hillsdale.

The school welcomes conservative provocateurs—Dinesh D'Souza and Andy Ngo, among others—to speak at events, publishing some of the talks in *Imprimis*, a monthly digest of speeches. In 2021, Hillsdale tapped two of the authors of the Great Barrington Declaration—an open letter that advocated against widespread lockdowns early in the pandemic—to help launch the Academy for Science and Freedom, "to combat the recent and widespread abuses of individual and academic freedom made in the name of science."

The primary architect of Hillsdale's rise to prominence is the college's president, Larry Arnn. "Education is the purpose of society," he told me. "If you want

The Christian liberal-arts college has developed a blueprint for schools nationwide.

ILLUSTRATION BY ÁLVARO BERNIS

to help, as a citizen, your country, I think that's the way." Last November, Arnn gave a speech in which he described education as a cultural battleground, arguing that public schools have recently "adopted the purpose of supplanting the family and controlling parents." To address this concern, Hillsdale has ventured outside of higher education, helping to launch K-12 charter schools nationwide. Arnn has set an ambitious mission for this project, one that suggests Hillsdale is only getting started in its fight to reclaim American education: "We're going to try to find a way to teach anyone who wants us to help them learn."

I arrived at Hillsdale College on the morning of freshman convocation. My drive to the main campus, which is about two hours southwest of Detroit, led me past farms and cow pastures, and along an unpaved road. As I pulled up, I was greeted by a bronze statue of a Civil War soldier carrying a flag with a broken staff. More than four hundred Hillsdale students fought on behalf of the Union, which the school says is the most of any private college in the North—a fact that I would be reminded of often during my visit.

The convocation was held in one of the school's athletic centers. Professors streamed past me in full regalia, looking like brightly colored fish amid the schools of new students. A string quartet played at the front of the room. (Hillsdale is not an a-cappella kind of place, though a third of the students study music, often classical.) A curly-haired senior kicked off the ceremony. "We're always one graduating class away from losing the student culture here," she said from the lectern. "Hold yourself to a higher standard, because it's what you need. It's what Hillsdale needs. It's what our country needs. It's what God needs."

Next up was the president. Arnn, who is seventy, wore blue robes with a pin-striped suit and black tennis shoes that looked vaguely orthopedic. He spoke to the crowd about the virtues of pursuing truth. "There are things to know," he explained. "They are beautiful things to know that will make you better if you know them." As he wrapped up his comments, he noted that Winston Churchill was a "blubberer," and that no one should be ashamed of getting emotional as they said goodbye.

Parents wept as they clung to their children. A bagpiper played the piercing melody of "Scotland the Brave," making it feel as though the kids were getting sent into battle at the foot of the Highlands, rather than just being dropped off at school. Orientation advisers hovered around the room, wearing T-shirts bearing Hillsdale's motto, *Virtus Tentamine Gaudet:* "Strength rejoices in the challenge."

Arnn came to Hillsdale in 2000, while the school was emerging from national scandal. For twenty-eight years, the college had been led by George Roche III, a prominent libertarian. His daughter-in-law, Lissa Roche, who worked at the school, came to occupy a role akin to First Lady of Hillsdale. She was also, evidently, in love with her father-in-law. One day, she claimed that they had long been romantically involved. (He denied the affair.) Shortly afterward, she took a revolver out of her husband's gun cabinet and went to the school's arboretum, where she killed herself. "It was traumatic," David Whalen, an English professor and a former provost, told me. "There's no soft-pedalling it."

George Roche resigned, and a committee scrambled to find his replacement. Arnn—a friend of one of the committee members, the conservative firebrand William F. Buckley, Jr.—was at the top of the shortlist. At the time, Arnn was the head of the Claremont Institute, a conservative think tank in California. ("If you're looking for a conservative person who's got an education and can talk a bit, the field is small," he told me.) He got the job.

Arnn grew up in Arkansas and studied under Harry Jaffa, a combative scholar of the political philosopher Leo Strauss. After helping found Claremont, Arnn played a major role in the passage of Proposition 209, which effectively ended affirmative action in college admissions in California. Arnn has deep ties to the G.O.P. establishment—he told me that he got "close-ish" to taking a job as the head of the Heritage Foundation—but he's never been a creature of Washington. He has preferred to cultivate his influence from afar.

In 2020, Trump formed the 1776 Commission, in response to the rise of critical race theory and the *Times'* 1619 Project; its aim was to promote education about America's "inspiring" founding. He picked Arnn to chair the group, which included Mike Pompeo and Ben Carson as ex-officio members. A few years before that, Arnn had published a book, "The Founders' Key," claiming that the progressive movement had weakened the power of America's founding documents. It landed blurbs from Republican politicians such as Paul Ryan, Mike Lee, and Tom Cotton, whose wedding Arnn says he attended. "We're from Arkansas," Arnn said of Cotton. "We're cousins." (Not in the real way, Arnn clarified, but in "the Arkansas way.")

The word "conservative" doesn't feature prominently in Hillsdale's promotional materials; the school simply describes itself as a "small, Christian, classical liberal arts college." When I asked Arnn and other professors whether Hillsdale is conservative, they all gave the same, slightly uncoöperative answer: yes, in the sense that Hillsdale is "conserving things."

Many students identify as conservative, although the ones I spoke with said that this manifests in different ways. Will McIntosh, who grew up in Iowa as the son of a Baptist preacher, enthusiastically briefed me on the virtues of the Austrian school of economics, one of Hillsdale's specialties. (Ludwig von Mises, a major figure in that movement, donated his library to Hillsdale.) Colton Duncan, a devout Catholic from Ohio, rejects libertarianism, saying that he and his friends frequently discuss how to cultivate a moral economic system as an alternative to "woke capitalism and neocolonialism." The ardently pro-Trump contingent on campus appears to be small, both among students and staff. Paul Rahe, a history professor, said he doubted that a majority of the faculty voted for Trump in 2016. (Arnn endorsed Trump after the Republican primary that year, joining a group of conservative intellectuals who wrote that he was the candidate "most likely to restore the promise of America.") These days, the campus seems to favor DeSantis over Trump, according to a recent survey by the student newspaper.

Some people are surprised to find, upon arriving on campus, that there is relatively little appetite for partisanship. Politics just "wasn't in the mouths of my peers or the administration," Tori Hope Petersen, a 2018 graduate, told me. Arnn steers students away from partisan

acrimony. "There's rumors going around that I'm not fully satisfied with the condition of the government of the United States," he said, to approving laughter and applause, at a parents' dinner after the convocation. "I want you to know, we are going to discourage your child from being much involved in all that."

And yet, beyond its campus, Hillsdale has waded directly into political conflicts, in large part by hosting speakers and disseminating their hotly contested ideas via *Imprimis*, which has more than six million subscribers—roughly twice as many as the Washington *Post*. Christopher Rufo, the researcher and conservative activist who spearheaded the campaign against critical race theory, gave a talk at the school last spring called "Laying Siege to the Institutions," in which he argued that conservatives will never win the fight against progressivism "if we play by the rules set by the élites who are undermining our country." Roger Kimball, of the conservative arts journal *The New Criterion*, claimed in a lecture that Democrats and the media vastly overhyped "the January 6th hoax," noting that "every honest person knows that the 2020 election was tainted."

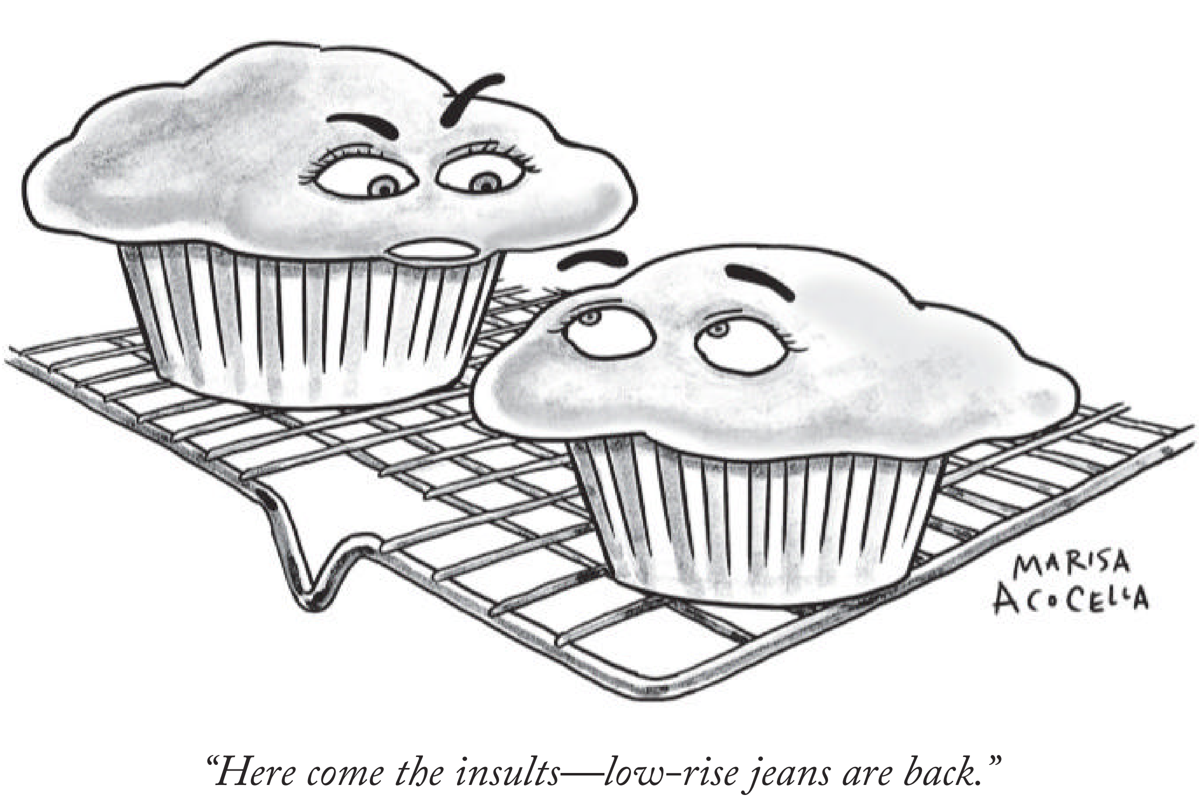
Hillsdale's public image has made it difficult for Arnn to remain in some scholarly circles. "Even prior to the Trump Administration, he had given a lot of people in the academic world real pause," George Thomas, a professor at Claremont McKenna College and the director of the school's Salvatori Center, of which Arnn was a longtime adviser, told me. "Flirtation with the disreputable right, flirtation with serious racism, hysterical about progressives who disagree with you being threats to the constitutional order." Thomas happily let Arnn's term on the advisory board expire.

Several alumni told me a version of the same theory about the divergence between Hillsdale's internal and external identities. The college refuses any government funding, including federal aid to students, to avoid being subject to federal regulations such as Title IX, which forbids sex-based discrimination in higher education. But to attract people to a small liberal-arts college in Michigan—and to pay for their cloistered learning—Hillsdale needs to be a household name. So, like Benjamin Franklin lifting his kite and key in the lightning storm, Arnn harnesses the power of the culture wars for his own purposes. "Some alums cringe when Hillsdale is advertised on Fox News or Sean Hannity," Brittany Baldwin, a 2012 graduate who worked as a speechwriter in the Trump White House, told me. "They feel like it's underselling what Hillsdale really is. But Dr. Arnn is very smart, in the sense that he has found a way to reach millions of people who otherwise would have never known about the school, by focussing on the values that it has in common with many conservatives, who happen to be able to give the school money." When I asked Arnn if this assessment was correct, he replied, "I've said almost exactly that to Rush Limbaugh!"

One way the school reaches those conservatives is by offering a trove of free online courses, in which more than three million people have enrolled. "Probably the most common question that I have asked of me by students and friends of the college is 'What happened to my country?'" Kevin Slack, who teaches politics, says, in a course titled The American Left: From Liberalism to Despotism. Across roughly six hours of video lectures, Slack gives an overview of leftist movements since the First World War, explaining the influence of figures such as Antonio Gramsci and John Rawls. Diversity-and-inclusion officers are part of a "priesthood that goes sniffing through private lives to look for original sins of racism or genderism," Slack says. Progressive whites are "racial saviors" whose "greatest hostility and hatred is reserved for middle-class whites, who they seek to eradicate or enslave." Slack concludes the course with advice to conservatives. "Stop apologizing for everything," he says. "Understand that the tyranny you saw in 2020," including COVID-19 lockdowns and Black Lives Matter protests, "is what the left has in store for you: a constant apology, constant subjugation, and a deprivation of all of your rights."

Arnn imagines Hillsdale's project as a series of concentric circles: undergraduate and graduate education at the center, the school's online courses as the next ring, and its events and speakers as another. I understood how this works after talking with Will and Monica Trainor, a couple from Texas who have sent four of their children to Hillsdale. The Trainors discovered the school through *Imprimis*, and, when their eldest son was applying to college, they visited the campus and fell in love. Now Monica uses the school's online Constitution course in her children's homeschool curriculum, and she keeps a stack of Hillsdale promotional flyers on hand, occasionally giving them out to high-school seniors and parents in her community. "We spent eighteen years instilling our values in our son," Will explained. "We've seen too many of our friends lose kids that have gone in with certain family values and have come out not with those same values."

Throughout the years, Arnn has accrued another powerful set of Hillsdale allies: small-city-gentry types, who have often made modest fortunes in obscure industries, and who have been persuaded to dedicate some of their life's earnings



"Here come the insults—low-rise jeans are back."

to the school despite not having attended. One example is S. Prestley Blake, the co-founder of the Friendly's ice-cream-and-restaurant chain. In 2014, in honor of his hundredth birthday, Blake built a replica of Monticello on his Connecticut estate, which he gave to Hillsdale; the college turned it into the Blake Center for Faith and Freedom. Charles Hoogland, a founder of the now defunct rental chain Family Video, and his wife, Kathleen, funded Hillsdale's Hoogland Center for Teacher Excellence. A few days after the freshman convocation, the school hosted an event called Ladies for Liberty, where female attendees paid a thousand dollars for four days of firearms instruction and lectures on the Constitution. The event was, in part, held at Hillsdale's shooting range, which, thanks to donor largesse, has become sophisticated enough to serve as an official training center for the U.S. Olympic shooting team.

"You don't get money by asking for it," Arnn told me. "You get money by showing them what you do." Between 2000, when he took over, and 2021, the latest year for which financial data is available, annual contributions to Hillsdale increased more than sevenfold, putting the school's fund-raising on par with that of élite liberal-arts colleges outside of the Ivy League. At an event last winter, DeSantis told Arnn, "The fact that you're able to raise money from people who didn't necessarily go here or have kids here shows you that people do value excellence. They value the truth."

Recently, a new craze has come to Hillsdale's campus: weight lifting. Last summer, the college installed exercise equipment in the dorms, in an effort to reduce stress and depression. ("There's been an explosion in student counselling since I've been here at the college," Arnn told parents. "I've never liked it.") The lifting trend started with Carl Young, a classics professor, whose faculty friends—mostly classicists and philosophers, "all ninety-pound weaklings," in Arnn's words—began joining Young at the gym. (Arnn has tagged along a few times.) One professor has joked that there should be a philosophy-and-weight-lifting club called Will to Power. I asked Young whether there's an ideological motivation behind the workouts—pushback against a culture where, say, men are weak and masculinity is diminished. He looked at me blankly. "I don't know about that," he said.

Luke Hollister, a junior from Washington State who serves as Hillsdale's head student ambassador, gave me a campus tour. We swung by the student union, the Grewcock Center, named for a Nebraska family who made their fortune in mining and construction. (The center tops Arnn's list of buildings to renovate; he finds it so ugly that he has nicknamed it Arnn's Shame.) We ambled down the Liberty Walk, where statues of history's great heroes line the college's well-manicured lawns: Ronald Reagan leans jauntily against a column, Margaret Thatcher sits insouciantly among the trees. Donors can sponsor a brick on the walk for a thousand dollars. ("Sadly, reports show that increasing numbers of schools are indoctrinating students with a false and dishonest narrative of our nation's history, presenting America as essentially and irredeemably flawed," Hillsdale's Web site reads. "Your Liberty Walk brick shows that you're on the battlefield of education, promoting the knowledge and understanding necessary to preserve liberty.")



Hillsdale has always been a Christian college, but several alumni told me that the school has played up its religious identity in recent years, perhaps as a way of enticing donors. (Arnn denied this, noting that the school's Christian roots are clear in its founding documents, although he acknowledged that Hillsdale used to be "shy" about its religiosity.) The college isn't a Christian school in the vein of Liberty University, which the Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell, Sr., founded to train "champions for Christ." But Arnn believes that a liberal-arts education requires students to grapple with questions about the nature of God. A perennial debate among students on campus is Protestantism versus Catholicism. Students tend to go on winding theological journeys, often gravitating toward more liturgically formal expressions of Christianity, such as Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. "You see a lot more appreciation for tradition," Michael Hoggatt, a junior from Wisconsin who grew up evangelical, said. "Lower-church students tend not to have that sort of catechesis." When I met him, he was attending an Anglican parish, and now he's in the process of converting to Catholicism. On Instagram, an unofficial Hillsdale meme account recently made a joke about new students: "catholic by fall. ring by spring."

In 2010, Hillsdale published a set of guidelines on the school's moral commitments. One states that "morally responsible sexual acts" occur "in marriage and between the sexes." The guidelines stress that students are admitted "regardless of their personal beliefs," though the school discourages "ideological pressures or actions that press the College to abandon its commitments or disrupt its good order." So although there are L.G.B.T.Q. students on campus, it is almost impossible for them to form clubs, and some have found it hard to speak openly about their identities. One alumnus told me that he was called into the dean's office after he was seen placing his head in his boyfriend's lap on the campus lawn. Mary Blendermann, a Hillsdale graduate who recently came out as gender fluid, described being socially ostracized as a sophomore after she cut her hair short and started dressing in a more masculine way. "People I used to sit with in the dining hall didn't really want to sit with me anymore," she said. Kailey Andrew, another graduate, told me she had received a short handwritten list of professors who were thought to support L.G.B.T.Q. students—people who were safe to talk to, behind closed doors.

As I walked around campus, it was also impossible not to notice the whiteness of the student body and the faculty. Every professor I met was a white man, except Khalil Habib, a politics professor, who is Lebanese Catholic. Hillsdale pointedly refuses to compile statistics on its students' racial backgrounds. Shortly before Arnn was hired, officials from the Michigan Department of Education visited the campus to determine whether the student body was sufficiently diverse. Years later, Arnn, testifying before a subcommittee of the Michigan state legislature, said that the officials had been looking for "dark ones," a phrase that he later apologized for using—kind of. "No

offense was intended by the use of that term except to the offending bureaucrats, and Dr. Arnn is sorry if such offense was honestly taken," the school wrote in a statement. "But the greater concern, he believes, is the state-endorsed racism the story illustrates."

I asked Arnn whether the racial homogeneity on campus is a detriment to the school. "If it is—and I'm not confident that it is—it's not as important as having people here who want to be here," he replied. He sees Hillsdale's involvement with K-12 charter schools as an answer to the long-standing problem of educational inequalities. "Start early," he said. "Give everybody a chance. That's nearly all of what I want to do."

Arnn told a story about starting a program, early in his tenure, to bring students from inner-city Detroit to Hillsdale College. "It's on my list of dumb things I've done from which I've learned," he said. "They weren't ready to come here. They hadn't done any preparation. They thought it was a magical place—fancy." He paused for a moment. "It's fancier now!" Later, the college created the Frederick Douglass Scholarship, to support first-generation college students, along with those from low-income households or economically disadvantaged school districts. "Why should we favor a rich Black kid over a poor white kid?" Arnn said. "I don't want to tell a student here that that's the significant thing about them," he said, referring to race.

Some students appreciate this approach. Amy Buffini, a Black transfer student, told me that at her previous school, Point Loma Nazarene University, everyone was hyperaware of race and afraid of "saying the wrong thing." She's more at ease at Hillsdale. But Arnn's tendency to downplay race has also been controversial within the Hillsdale community. In the summer of 2020, after George Floyd's death, a few hundred alumni signed an open letter calling for the college to make a statement in support of the idea that Black lives matter. One alumna, the journalist Liz Essley Whyte, argued that proud moments in Hillsdale's history—such as when its football team refused to play in the 1955 Tangerine Bowl because its Black players were not allowed to participate—had been used to obscure instances in which the college had published or hosted racists and segregationists, such as the white supremacist Jared Taylor. Another alumnus, Will Smiley, an assistant professor at the University of New Hampshire, wrote a letter suggesting that Hillsdale overly catered to its conservative allies: "Perhaps the donors who once offered the college independence from the government now impose a straitjacket of their own."

Arnn told me that the college didn't make the statement that the alumni wanted because the events of that summer were "unfolding contemporary politics." He went on, "How do you even know what you think about them? George Floyd was not a particularly good fella. That matters, right? And he was killed, and that matters—a lot. We're not geared up around here to respond to the news." Besides, Arnn added, "we don't much like it when things are demanded of us."

The atmosphere on Hillsdale's campus might feel familiar to some visitors, particularly those who attended small liberal-arts schools decades ago. As Rahe, the history professor, put it, Hillsdale is like "Williams College, 1955, with girls." Bradley Birzer, another history professor, said that Hillsdale is among a group of "weirdo colleges," including St. John's, the University of Dallas, and the liberal-studies program at Notre Dame, that still believe in teaching a canon of great books.

When Arnn arrived, he established requirements in theology and philosophy, along with a semester-long Constitution course. The Political Science Department was renamed the Politics Department, on the notion that political study should be normative and philosophical instead of mechanical and data-driven. It was an explicit rebuke to the wonkish approach favored by many academics. Adam Carrington, a politics professor, told me, "You won't see much in the way of quantitative methods—regression lines, things like that." Meanwhile, students studying biology, chemistry, and physics learn about the human aspects of the scientific process, debating such topics as the role of prizes in incentivizing certain kinds of research. Hillsdale kids tend to be studious and eager. Habib, the politics professor, recalled that, during his first semester of teaching, a student corrected a word in the translation of Aristotle that the class was using.

According to Whalen, the former provost, Arnn carefully selects faculty members who support the school's mission of educating students in the Western philosophical tradition. "He's very clear about everybody pointing in the same direction," Whalen said. The college doesn't pretend to have faculty representing every school of thought; it doesn't keep a Marxist around just for the heck of it. Besides, "a course in Nietzsche would probably be more controversial than Marx," Birzer, the history professor, told me, with a chuckle. "Nietzsche is sort of the bête noire within the philosophy department, and somewhat within history, too. He's the guy we love to hate at the college."

I sat in on a Western Heritage class—one of the jewels of Hillsdale's core curriculum—taught by Birzer. None of the students had laptops out, and I didn't see a single cell phone. The words "Occident" and "Orient" were scribbled on a blackboard. Birzer's students were learning about Plato's Crito. Birzer explained that Socrates argues that unjust actions are always unjust, regardless of the circumstances. "Our modern thinkers tend to be very, very subjective," he said. "Socrates is the exact opposite: he says there is capital-'T' truth, and our life is to pursue what that truth is, even when it leads to our own harm or death." He pointed out the similarity between Socrates' insight and that of another great figure of the West. "Socrates got there about four hundred and fifty years earlier than Jesus did," Birzer said. "I'm not comparing the two—don't get me wrong. Obviously, Jesus is fully man and fully God."

The course's required textbook is "Western Heritage: A Reader," a collection of primary sources compiled by Hillsdale professors. Other classes use an American-heritage reader, which is dominated by white voices. The selected texts from the period following the Civil War include sources making the case for the Old South and the New South, but they don't deal directly with the reign of racial terror carried out during and after Reconstruction and into the twentieth century. At best, this is a problem inherent to the study of famous primary texts: those powerful enough to write history rarely focus on the stories of people at its margins.

Birzer recognized that "no reader is perfect"; in courses where Reconstruction is taught, students are also assigned



"Hey, at least you got a severance package."

a textbook by a Hillsdale professor to get more context on the hardships former slaves faced during that period. When I visited, he and another Hillsdale professor were in the process of recording lectures that students at other universities will be able to take for credit, significantly expanding Hillsdale's educational footprint. In the lectures, "we're going to confront the race issue as openly and directly as we can," Birzer told me. "We're not going to whitewash it at all. We're going to talk about what happened in Tulsa. We're going to talk about race riots." He was aware that many of the people likely to watch the videos will be conservative and affluent—and might not know much about the history of racial discrimination and violence in America. "A lot of conservatives kind of dropped the ball on how to deal with that issue," he said. In his view, however, too much of the contemporary conversation about race traffics in self-flagellation and apology. "We don't want to sit there and be these manly guys on World War II and then turn around and get sappy on race," he said.

According to Arnn, arguably the best professor at the school is Justin Jackson, who teaches English. ("He looks like Rasputin," Arnn said. "And I think he's kind of a liberal.") Jackson told me that when he first considered a job at Hillsdale, in the early two-thousands, he was circumspect: "When you read the Web page, you think, Oh, do you read Homer through a Reagan lens?" He worried about censorship. "You're told all the time: conservatives are going to crush your academic freedom." But that hasn't been his experience; he said that the horror stories he hears about crackdowns on academic freedom tend to come from his friends at more progressive institutions. (In recent years, Arnn has made himself a Lady Liberty to the pre-cancelled; he described a professor who started last fall as "a refugee from wokeness.")

At more progressive schools, students have an instinct to read texts "to show that there's empire or colonialism or racism," Michael Roth, a liberal-arts scholar and the president of Wesleyan University, said. "To me, that's like shooting fish in a barrel. All you're learning about is your own superiority." But, he added, "I do think it's a mistake to imagine that the Western tradition necessarily leads to the discovery of truth with a capital 'T.' You can only do that if you ignore a lot of the world." Reading storied texts to justify your views as an American or a Christian or an inheritor of the classical tradition—"that also is a way of justifying your own parochialism," he said.

Jackson is leery of the idea that professors might encourage their students to adopt a particular world view. He wants students to inhabit the literary worlds of the authors he teaches. "I try to teach a hermeneutics of charity," he said. "When we read texts, we aren't in an ideological fight with it." Hillsdale, he believes, is "deeply humanistic." The texts are for everyone, equally.

In the past decade, Hillsdale has exported its educational philosophy to K-12 schools across the United States, as part of a larger movement to restore "classical education"—a liberal-arts curriculum designed to cultivate wisdom and teach children to pursue the ancient ideals of truth, beauty, and goodness. Hillsdale has approved eighty schools to use the K-12 curriculum created by the college's professors. Schools that want more intensive help can send their teachers to a summer training session on Hillsdale's campus and consult with college staff. Nearly all of these resources are free.

Hillsdale's K-12 curriculum places a value on civic education. In 2021, the school released the first iteration of its 1776 Curriculum, centered on the nation's founding and history. Grade-school students are given a list of great figures, such as George Washington, Crispus Attucks, and Patrick Henry. Middle schoolers consider a draft of the Declaration of Independence, to see what was added and removed by Congress. High-school students are asked to read speeches and debates by Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, along with a speech by Alexander Stephens, the Vice-President of the Confederacy. The curriculum refers teachers of all grade levels to Hillsdale College's relevant online courses, and to books such as "Land of Hope," by the historian Wilfred McClay, which was written to counter what McClay describes as the "radical," "one-sided" narratives of texts that are commonly used in classrooms today, such as Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States." (Arnn recently hired McClay.)

Hillsdale makes the K-12 curriculum available to educators to use independently, but the results have been uneven. In South Dakota, an emeritus politics professor at Hillsdale, William Morrisey, facilitated a committee that used the college's materials to revise the state's social-studies standards. They were criticized by the American Historical Association as

“excessively long and detailed in their prescriptions, yet totally inadequate in their vision of what history learning entails,” omitting “any and all forms of historical inquiry in favor of rote memorization.”

The 1776 Curriculum includes many references to slavery, racism, nativism, and oppression. But these passages have a certain inflection. Elementary-school teachers are instructed to explain, for instance, that “America is and always has been a land of immigrants,” including those “considered the indigenous or ‘native’ peoples of both North and South America,” who “likely migrated from northeast Asia.” John Brown’s raid on the armory at Harpers Ferry was evidence of a “breakdown in civil dialogue.” In the middle-school and high-school material, racism is described as “the voluntary acts of individual people.”

The 1776 Curriculum has become intertwined, in many people’s minds, with Trump’s 1776 Commission, given their similar names, shared aims, and mutual connection to Larry Arnn. And conservative politicians have eagerly latched on to the school’s work. DeSantis has noted that “classical academies are flourishing in the state of Florida. We hope to have many more.” (The state currently has at least nine Hillsdale-affiliated schools.) Kari Lake, a Republican who ran for governor in Arizona in 2022, said on the stump, “I believe in the Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum.”

Last year, Bill Lee, the Republican governor of Tennessee, announced a plan to launch Hillsdale-affiliated charter schools across the state, calling Hillsdale “the standard-bearer in quality curriculum and the responsibility of preserving American liberty.” A few months later, Hillsdale hosted a reception in Williamson County, a wealthy area south of Nashville. At the event, Arnn described the sorry state of American schools. “The administrators you hire are all diversity people,” he said. “And that helps you, by the way, with your federal requirements—that you have a certain number by color.” Later, in a conversation with Lee, Arnn proclaimed that “teachers are trained in the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country.” Lee took a drink from his water bottle and said nothing.

NewsChannel 5, a TV station in Nashville, aired a “hidden-camera video” of the event and ran at least two dozen follow-up segments on Hillsdale, speculating about its ideological motivations. A Johnson City pastor wrote an op-ed in his local paper accusing Hillsdale of promoting Christian nationalism. (When I asked Arnn about this, he said that Christianity is premised on the freedom of religious faith, which is separate from the laws of the land. “That means there’s no such thing as Christian nationalism,” he said. “Couldn’t be.”) A local teachers’ union sent out mailers with Arnn’s face Photoshopped onto the body of a man wearing a straw boater and a red-and-white striped suit jacket, holding a clear bottle labelled “charter snake oil.” Arnn attempted to clarify in an op-ed in the *Tennessean.* “Dumb can mean ‘unintelligent,’ which I did not mean,” he wrote. “Dumb also means ‘ill-conceived’ or ‘misdirected.’ ”

Just one Hillsdale-aligned charter school had already opened in Tennessee, but it announced that it was parting ways with the college. A charter-management organization attempted to open three others that would have used Hillsdale’s curriculum, but the applications failed; it later withdrew from an appeals process. (The organization is trying again for the fall of 2024.)

Arnn’s daughter, Kathleen O’Toole, the college’s assistant provost for K-12 education, insisted that the project is “not narrowly political or partisan.” When it comes to American history, “we should study the things that are embarrassing to us, and the things that are shameful,” she said. “But we shouldn’t forget that there are also moments to be proud of.” As for Arnn, he does not regret what he said about teachers. He believes that teachers should be “symbols of wisdom” who are experts in their subject matter, not just in the skills of teaching, which he thinks education schools overemphasize. “I think it deprives teachers of something and students of something,” he said. “We’re trying to program them.”

The whole episode illustrates the way in which Hillsdale’s politics—and Arnn’s uncensored style—have complicated the school’s attempt to foster a broad revival of liberal-arts education. Even other players in the classical-school movement have hesitations about Hillsdale. Robert Jackson, the executive director of the Great Hearts Institute, a network for classical-school leaders, told me that Hillsdale envisions “a more distinct political identity” for its schools than other classical schools do—and there are hundreds of others, religious and secular, private and public. While he respects people who work at Hillsdale, the school’s high-profile role in the movement “potentially positions classical education as a partisan project,” Jackson said. “We do not want to throw students into a kind of partisan affair as a result of their education.”

Another friend of Arnn’s, neither cousin nor Arkansan, is the former Vice-President Mike Pence. They spoke “a fair amount” while Pence was in the White House, Arnn said. I asked him whether Pence had called him in the days leading up to January 6th, seeking advice on certifying the election. Arnn paused. “I think it would be indiscreet for me to answer that question,” he said. “Let me say that I thought, on that day, the election had been over for a month.” He went on, “I think the election was fishy, changing the laws in big ways on the eve of the election. But it’s done now.” Arnn called the issue of the supposedly stolen election a prudential question—one about which people of shared values might disagree, in good faith. He has designed Hillsdale as a refuge from such subjects. And yet the very purpose of a liberal-arts education is to develop the wisdom to see clearly in upside-down days—to separate contemporary ferment from foundational truths when it really matters.

This past fall, Hillsdale launched the next phase of its K-12 initiative: a graduate school of classical education that will train the future leaders of the movement—headmasters, teachers, deans. The eleven students in the graduate school’s inaugural cohort sat at a long table on their first day of class. Nine were returning Hillsdale alumni. Whalen, the former provost, was teaching a course called Humane Letters, focussed on texts that “touch the hem of the garment of what is universally human.” The students listened as Whalen read them poetry, about wintry fields and stately ships and beauty for its own sake. A ceiling-high window gave a view of the trees. If you closed your eyes, the classroom felt a bit like a cathedral.

Hillsdale is constructing a new building to house the graduate school, which Arnn is hoping to expand next year. Along the Liberty Walk, it will run from Reagan to Thatcher. ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

UPSTATE FANTASY

BY EVAN ALLGOOD

Scrolling through Hudson Valley Craigslist one night, I come across a sprawling—but cozy—oak-floored Victorian house that's perfectly insulated despite being two hundred years old. I buy it for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, without having to borrow any money from my parents.

Moving is a breeze. Even at the end of the brisk drive upstate, I'm in a sea of B.L.M. signs and rainbow flags, and nobody wants to shoot me for my political beliefs. In fact, I receive several compliments on my electric pickup truck, and everyone calls me Chief.

Upon my arrival, the family of mice living in my house pack up and leave, but not before thoughtfully scrubbing the oven of their urine and feces. They also Windex all seven of the stained-glass windows in the bathroom.

I chop so much wood for the natural-stone fireplace that my hands become calloused (hotly) and I put on twenty pounds of muscle. The muscle is concentrated mostly in my arms, chest, abs, and penis.

Every day I wake up at 5 A.M. to volunteer at a nearby animal sanctuary, because the valley's sublime sunrises have transformed me, overnight, into a morning person.

A gruff but bighearted neighbor, Meeks, shovels the snow from my driveway and tends to the yard, unprompted. When I offer to pay him for his work, Meeks says, "Please. I'm a huge fan of your writing—the art you put into the world is payment enough."

At my favorite local dive, I play in a weekly poker game with a cast of colorful townies, like in "Nobody's Fool." We drink boilermakers all night but always make it home safely because the sparkling-clean Main Street trolley runs twenty-four hours a day.

Missing his native northern England (don't fact-check this), John Oliver moves the "Last Week Tonight" studio to Beacon or Hudson or wherever. He appoints me head writer based on the strength of a packet I wrote last year, which he rejected because it was too ahead of its time.

I accept under one condition: John join the weekly poker game.

Though I'm obscenely rich, and the value of my house has skyrocketed, my presence doesn't interfere with the area's cost of living, which remains low thanks to policies enacted by President Ocasio-Cortez.

My dad, a retired fighter pilot who's always respected me, buys a small Cessna so he and my mom can fly up to visit once a month. Whenever he's in town, my dad makes improvements to the house without being asked. When I offer to pay him, he says, "Please. Just seeing you this happy, successful, and physically powerful is payment enough."

I don't miss going to concerts, comedy shows, or the doctor. Most nights I'm content to sit by the fire with Meeks, sipping on applejack and playing cribbage, a simple game that I intuitively grasp.

I make frequent trips into Manhattan to see my friends, who've collectively decided not to have kids so we can hang more. They chuckle as I gripe about the city prices, their envy subtle but palpable. Stirred by my bucolic glow, one by one they buy (slightly less impressive) houses down the road from mine.

Various fish-out-of-water high jinks and pastoral misadventures prompt me to write a comic rotating-P.O.V. novel called "Upstate Fare." I do a reading at the local bookshop, where I'm showered with laughter from the very people who inspired my novel's characters.

A few years later, I adapt the novel into a critically acclaimed HBO miniseries, which I co-create with my pal and professional equal, John Oliver.

On my ninetieth birthday, I pass away in my sleep, calloused hands folded (hotly) on my barrel chest. The whole valley turns up for my Viking funeral, where the mayor drapes the key to the city or township or whatever around my tree-trunk neck.

It takes four professional athletes to load my beefy corpse onto the raft. At the animal sanctuary where I volunteered, the goats thrash with grief as I'm consigned to the Hudson River. They just know.

When my next of kin offers to pay for the funeral service, the mayor says, "Please. His time here, upstate, was payment enough." ♦

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

YOUNG AND RESTLESS

Michael R. Jackson writes a soap-opera musical.

BY HILTON ALS

More often than not, if the composer and playwright Michael R. Jackson was in or near the Lyceum Theatre after a performance of his sui-generis hit musical, "A Strange Loop," during its recent Broadway run, fans and critics would gather around him, not just to have their *Playbill* autographed but to continue the conversation that the show had started. Usually, it takes an activist star, like Jane Fonda—or whoever is playing Aladdin—to cause a post-performance commotion outside a theatre. But a writer? A theatre nerd who wasn't Lin-Manuel Miranda? A self-described "outsider's outsider's outsider" and a former usher for "The Lion King"? The protagonist of "A Strange Loop," which closed in New York in January and opens at London's Barbican in June, is, according to the script, a "fat, Black queer" man named Usher, who can barely support himself as he attempts to write a musical about the "strange loop"—the cycle of hope and rejection that his heart seems trapped in. Not exactly what you'd expect to be a box-office success. If anything, "A Strange Loop" is a show-biz story—complete with references to Stephen Sondheim and Scott Rudin—but it's a show-biz story about how there is, in effect, no real stage to frame, let alone contain, an artist with Usher's sensibilities (which is to say, Jackson's): that is, until Jackson remade the American musical with "A Strange Loop."

The show earned Jackson, who is forty-two, the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the 2022 Tony awards for Best Musical and Best Book of a Musical, among other honors. Ironically, in the show Jackson's stand-in, Usher, is hassled by his agent for his artistic "integrity," which deprives the agent of commissions and barely allows Usher to eat. Where, the agent wants to know, is the material that can be translated into capital? Why can't Usher ditch the purity bit and ghostwrite some gospel plays for Tyler Perry? In other words, play racial volleyball: serve one Mary McLeod Bethune, then go in for a Frederick Douglass kill. But Usher can't even find the net. Sitting in his cramped apartment, Usher is visited by his (embodied) Thoughts—ensemble members who play the voices in Usher's head, as well as multiple minor characters. Thought No. 3, as Usher's agent, doesn't get very far with the Perry pitch:

USHER: Nothing that he writes seems real to me
THOUGHT NO. 3: Yes, you think he sucks.
USHER: Just simple-minded, hack buffoonery
THOUGHT NO. 3: But no White theaters will touch you. . . .
USHER: It's true I'm still emerging. . . .
Looking to make my start
But not so hungry that I'd ride the Chitlin Circuit
I'm into entertainment that's undercover art
My mission is to figure out just how to work it.

Despite his resolve, Usher is visited by other Thoughts, who call him a "race



The director of the show said, "The piece is larger than life, but it's still life." Her challenge has been to "keep the life part."

 PHOTOGRAPH BY JINGYU LIN

traitor" and an "ass licker," because he won't play along. Then, suddenly, the Thoughts transform into the Ancestors. Entering one by one, they declare themselves to a startled Usher:

USHER: Wh-wh-who are you?
THOUGHT NO. 2: I'm Harriet Motherfucking *Tubman*. And I got a problem wit you.
THOUGHT NO. 4: I'm Marcus Motherfucking *Mosiah Garvey* and I got a problem wit you too.
THOUGHT NO. 6: Jimmy Baldwin.
THOUGHT NO. 3: Zora Neale Hurston.
THOUGHT NO. 5: 12 Years a Slave here . . .
THOUGHT NO. 1: Whitney.
USHER: W-w-w-what do you want with me?
THOUGHT NO. 2: To get you together. Makin' me get MY Black ass up outta MY twenty-dollar grave to put YO Black ass on blast talkin' bad 'bout Tyler Perry.

Then all the Thoughts sing in unison:

Who the fuck is you, *nigguh*?
You look it but you ain't no true *nigguh*
You make us ancestors blue
Actin' bran' new, *nigguh*, I can't wit you
Tyler is a real *nigguh*
And not a cracker-pleasin' seal *nigguh*
He writes how our people feel
With him at the wheel; *nigguh*, what cain't we do?

Whenever I saw the show, folks in the audience waved their programs like New Testament pages as the Ancestors appeared, releasing us from the bondage of acceptable onstage Black behavior, which often involves a performance of Black Invincibility—never mind the yoke, we are ennobled, and will survive. By casting off and lampooning this ethos, Jackson was following in the tradition of artists whose work was a critique of race-as-entertainment, and a refusal to play into stereotypes. These works include George C. Wolfe's "The Colored Museum" (1986), Suzan-Lori Parks's "Fucking A" (2000), Thomas Bradshaw's "Southern Promises" (2008), Robert O'Hara's "Barbecue" (2015), Danai Gurira's "Familiar" (2015), Donald Glover's "Atlanta" (2016-22), Jackie Sibblies Drury's "Fairview" (2018), and Michaela Coel's astonishing television series "I May Destroy You" (2020). Jackson, Wolfe, and the rest explore how Black history and pop culture have made and remade the worlds of their imaginations—and, by extension, our own.

One evening before the world shut down, Jackson and I had dinner at Orso, in midtown, a favorite of show-business folk. Jackson is brown-skinned, with a beautifully shaped head and large eyes framed by glasses that are habitually smudged—they sometimes make him look like a kid who knows a lot and is just off to the library, beyond excited to learn more. The playwright was filled with his usual verve. I was raised to reveal as little as possible when white people were around, and to never talk about race in their presence. But Jackson, I found, didn't hold back, and, when it came to sex and race, spoke his mind with great vigor and considerable volume. He didn't seem to notice that a number of white diners turned to look at us during our conversation. And he didn't notice my discomfort and anxiety—they can get us; they can always get us—as he talked about whiteness in a "white space," because I didn't tell him.

It was the spring of 2019, and Jackson's new show, "White Girl in Danger," was in a workshop. (Because of the pandemic, the show was postponed until this spring; it opens at Second Stage on April 10th as a co-production with the Vineyard Theatre.) Jackson—who wore a T-shirt with lines through the words "imperialist," "white supremacist," "capitalist," and "patriarchy," until you got to the name of the late theorist bell hooks—talked about the transformative effect of theatre. "You have to do self-inquiry," he told me. "You have to know what is actually for real, not just some lame-ass, woke-ass political statement that you haven't really thought through. Tell the truth."

One piece that spoke to Jackson was Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman." "I saw it when I was nineteen years old," he said. "I don't know anything about being an old white man in the forties. But the idea that you're worth more dead than alive . . . However they did it, that idea communicated from that stage to my Black gay ass going to N.Y.U. . . . I wept. I felt sympathy and empathy for this man. And what I wanted to do in 'A Strange Loop' was to flip it. Can I make some old white man feel empathy for this young, Black, gay, musical-theatre writer? Can I get them to understand that this is about the human condition?"

In "White Girl in Danger," Jackson continues to examine how humanity gets categorized—by race, gender, and class—and what those straitjackets feel like when you try to break out of them and reach for something like freedom. In this musical, which he began to write in the fall of 2017, Jackson, an inveterate fan of soap operas, has created a soap-opera town called Allwhite, in which Meagan, Maegan, and Megan—three versions of the same whiteness—can't leave the house without encountering . . . danger. At the start of the show, as the three girls strike dramatic poses, a "Blackground Announcer" tells us:

Look both ways before crossing Megan or you just might find yourself in a world of danger. White Girl in Danger. . . .
Is it clumsiness or is it Zack? Either way, Meagan can't seem to stay out of danger. White Girl in Danger. . . .
Maegan is starting to look a little thin and all signs point to danger. White Girl in Danger.

The drama centers on maternal revenge, premarital sex, and—a huge plot point—a Black girl named Keesha Gibbs, who lives in Blackground but wants to cross over to Allwhite. Why can't she, too, live in a white wonderland? Why should she be relegated to Blackground, with its back-burner stories of police brutality and its history of slavery? Keesha wants to be involved in the real shit, the white-girl stuff that puts you at the center of your own story. Keesha's mother, Nell, who tells it like it is (and who may or may not have been inspired by the "sassy" character played by Nell Carter in the eighties sitcom "Gimme a Break!"), doesn't want her daughter to leave. While running away, Keesha sings:

Mother thinks that I want too much
That my Allwhite dreams are so out of touch
She doesn't understand the calculus
That what's good for me could be good for us
I will risk my character to set my people free
By pure force I'll change the course of Blackground history!

Keesha is a little disingenuous when

she claims that she's jettisoning herself out of Blackground for her people. What she really wants—what her internalized racism considers the ultimate prize—is a white man. In some ways, she's the flip side of Usher: all shaky, heteronormative id. In "A Strange Loop," Usher sings about his envy of white girls, who, unlike him, seem free to pursue their dreams:

On days his Blackness feels like another hurdle
That won't get out of his way
His inner white girl starts kicking like a baby
She wants to come out and play
She doesn't care if she ruffles any feathers
In fact, that is her M.O.
Where he's the kind of avoiding confrontation
There's not a bomb she won't throw because . . .
White girls can do anything, can't they?

Part of the brilliance of "A Strange Loop" lies in the conflict between Usher's self-awareness and the demands of the gay (and musical) marketplace. Toward the middle of the show, Usher sings about the way our identities, no matter how seemingly fixed, are made up of mismatching parts that we are always trying to hold together—or vomit up:

I don't care about marriage
And I will never be pushing a loud ass baby
Around in a carriage
No, I'll just walk around with a scowl on my face like
I'm Betty Friedan
Because the second wave feminist in me
Is at war with the dick-sucking Black, gay man
Who's sometimes looking for now
But also fifteen years later
And so the Grindr crowd turns me into a chronic
Stay-at-home masturbater . . .
So I fall outside of the norm
'Cause I burn my bra to keep warm

At one point in "A Strange Loop," Usher hooks up with a white "Daddy" type (played by a Black actor) who doesn't nurture; he just commands. In that terrible room, there is a gap between what our hero wants—love—and what he engages in, or allows, because of his silence: race play. It's a terrifying moment, and, if you've spent any time in that room, the acts that Jackson describes aren't as disheartening as his soulful acknowledgment of where the desire for love can lead you—straight to the crooked island of the loveless.

During a series of long talks that Jackson and I had after the Off Broadway run of "A Strange Loop" ended, in 2019, and before it opened on Broadway, in 2022, I thought about the fact that love—or the hope of love—plays such a strong part in the stories that his characters tell. It's reductive to read either of his two musicals as a literal transcription of his life. But, like any powerful artist, he borrows from what he knows—himself, and the world that made him—the better to make and remake his world onstage.

Jackson was raised in Detroit, the much loved younger son—he has an older brother—of Henry and Mary Jackson. His parents had been born in the South and, while still young, emigrated north. Henry worked for many years as a police officer and, after that, as a security consultant for General Motors; Mary worked in accounting for the same company. Jackson's family was "very, very, very involved" in the church, he told me. He has played the piano since he was eight, and accompanied two choirs at the church. "My mother was the church financial secretary for more than thirty years, my dad was a trustee, and my brother and I went to vacation Bible school every summer—and so you knew people's business, and the drama and all that," Jackson said. "Every Sunday you show up, and you play your part in the church play. I always feel like I learned about theatre from church." He also attended plays with his mother. "I've always been a fan of theatre," Mary Jackson said. "Mr. Jackson wasn't. So Michael was always my date."

"I grew up in a Black city and a Black family," Jackson said. "I went to Black schools. I went to Black churches. I went to Black family reunions. Almost everything I did was Black, Black, Black. It was so Black, to the point that I thought the whole world was basically that. And because of that I rebelled against it. No different than when a white person would rebel against their own upbringing." Children, of course, don't generally get to pack up and leave, but they can enter the world of their imaginations. The imaginary places Jackson most loved to visit were soap operas. His great-aunt Ruth, who babysat him before he started kindergarten, would dip snuff and then turn on "Days of Our Lives" or other popular serials. He thrilled to that world, with its weird coincidences, plot twists, and outrageous wealth and misfortune. After he started school, his aunt would keep him up to date. "I would call her on the phone, and—you can ask my mom—I'd be, like, 'Aunt Ruth, what happened?' And then she would fill me in, and we would be, like, 'Oh, my God, can you believe Vivian buried Carly alive? . . . But I also liked the other stuff, like Jack and Jennifer making love for the first time."

Things started to heat up even more when Jackson was in fourth grade, and an older cousin let him read her Jackie Collins novels. " 'Chances,' 'Lucky,' 'Lady Boss.' Lots of tumescence," he said. "I was deeply into it. And because I lived in a house where I couldn't look at dirty magazines, or porn, I could read books." In seventh grade, he got caught at school showing other kids the "good parts," and his father made him hand the books over. Then Michael discovered Alice Walker's "The Color Purple." "I was hungry for it," he told me.

Jackson attended Cass Technical High School, where his interest in music grew. He sang in a youth choir and was a huge fan of Tori Amos—he saw her as part of a "white girls' club," whose members got to express their feelings in song in a way that no closeted boy dare risk. Later, a favorite was Liz Phair, whose seminal "Exile in Guyville" had a seminal effect on Jackson. (One of its tracks is called "Strange Loop"; in it, Phair describes herself as "adamantly free.") In high school, Jackson, the good church boy, was surrounded by Black queerness—"All these boys fucking each other and breaking up with each other, and all under the radar"—but he felt outside it. I asked him why, and he told me, "Because I didn't go to the fine-ass-nigga finishing school." When I suggested otherwise—that he was cute, too—Jackson shut me down: "It's about being a *fine*-ass nigga. And I was not that." He was a bookish nerd, and his parents kept him on a tight leash.

Jackson didn't come out until he was sixteen, an event that was precipitated by what he refers to as the "trauma" in


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"Should I change our primary-care provider from YouTube to TikTok?"

• •

his gay-teen-age story line. He liked another boy in his school, but the boy told him, over the phone, that he wasn't interested. Jackson's father was eavesdropping on the line, and, afterward, confronted his son. "My mother walked home at that exact moment from church," Jackson told me. "It was the most hilarious and horrifying thing. And then it turned into this whole ordeal about 'God hates it, it's worse than murder.'" The juxtaposition between who Jackson's parents are—"They like everything. Every accomplishment I've ever had, they're super proud of me. They used to go on school trips with us. They're very involved"—and their reaction to his queerness is startling. (In "A Strange Loop," Usher's mother's worry and confusion about her son being gay is deeply touching.) His parents have since come to a kind of acceptance. "Michael was always determined to be Michael," his mother said. But the family doesn't discuss the subject. Jackson said, "For me, there's the added thing—and I feel this about most Black folks—we don't talk about sexuality. In general."

In 1999, Jackson, who had been greatly encouraged in his writing by three high-school teachers, enrolled in N.Y.U.'s Dramatic Writing program. He attended a lot of theatre. He also found himself trying to navigate New York's gay scene. "All I knew was Blackness," he told me. "And then I came to New York. . . . And the gay people I knew—because I was at N.Y.U.—were white. And those people became my friends. So then we would go to Splash, or to Pieces, or whatever—places that were filled with white people, or people who were interested in white people. So, even if you saw somebody Black, they only had eyes for white people. And maybe the white people had eyes for them because they were some kind of fetish. So then I was, like, 'All right, I'll orient myself toward white men.' And that proved to be disastrous at every single turn." These white men were even less interested in him than the Black boys from his high school had been, which was "doubly terrible." He found that he didn't fit well into what he calls the "gaytriarchy."

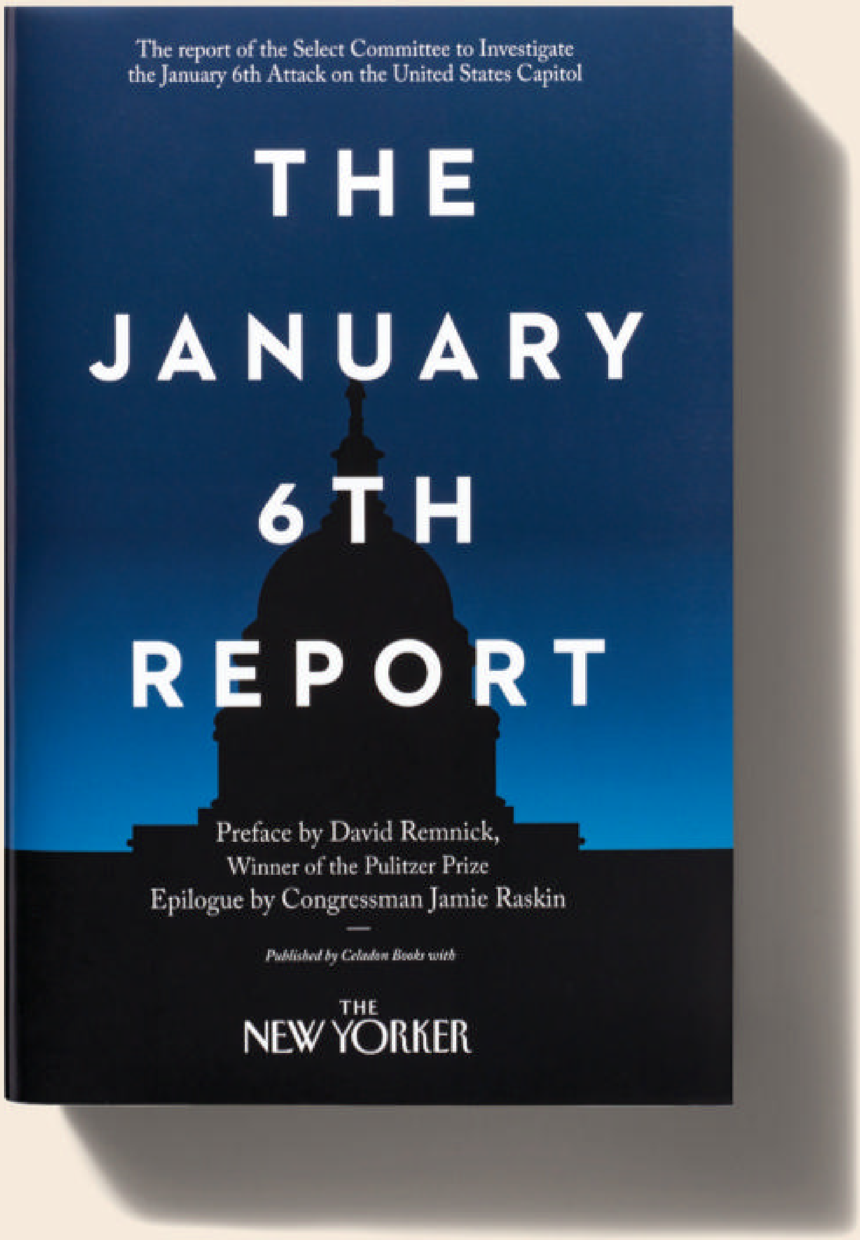
Recently, as pandemic restrictions were lifting, Jackson and I had dinner at an Italian restaurant in SoHo, and he told me about a white guy he met online during those years. They exchanged a few messages, and then Jackson told the man that he is short. The white guy's response "was, like, 'Michael, I'm so sorry, I think that we hit the first of the little bumps in the road if we're going to possibly consider dating. I've never dated anybody who was shorter than me, and I didn't even realize it because you're such an amazing conversationalist, and I love talking to you, and you're so amazing over e-mail . . .' And he was, like, 'While we're talking about height, I also should mention that I'm very tall and also I've never dated anybody whose penis was not at least the same size as mine, or larger.'" Jackson still went out with him. For their second date, the man suggested that they go to a speed-dating event. Jackson agreed. "This is where my self-esteem was," he said. "He matched with three people, and I matched with no one. Then, after that, we were walking to the train, and he was meeting someone else to go on a date with, who he introduced me to."

Part of Jackson's skill as a writer is in describing not just the pockets of pain we live in but the hope that led us there. Early in "White Girl in Danger," Keesha refuses to be warned against the dangers of the white world. As she talks with her mother, Nell, and Caroline, another resident of Blackground, this exchange takes place:

> CAROLINE: Yeah, Keesha; assimilation stinks! And besides, our lives of nonstop pain and sorrow ain't so bad!
>
> NELL: Not to mention the fact that them Allwhite suckas ain't nothin' but liars, schemers, manipulators . . . and *racists!*
>
> KEESHA: Racist or not, I just wanna be *seen, Ma!* I just wanna be part of that *world!!!!!!*

After graduating from college, Jackson held down a million dead-end jobs, including working as an usher at Disney shows, on Broadway, between 2003 and 2008. He lived uptown, with an ever-changing cast of roommates. One day, the cops came to his apartment. "I'm not

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Scan to buy.

afraid of cops," he told me. "My father was a cop." But, unbeknownst to Jackson, one of his roommates was allegedly dealing drugs. Rather than find out who was at fault, the cops threw Jackson onto a sofa and cuffed him. He started crying. They soon realized that he wasn't their suspect, and uncuffed him, but they continued to turn the place upside down, making small talk as they did it. "My apartment was being raided, but they're having a quotidian conversation about rent, commute, and my nice apartment," he told me.

Despite the ways that racism aims to shame you into accepting its rules, which include staying in your own cultural box, Jackson's tender work about white girl singers, Black queens, and white soap operas is evidence of his abiding faith in his imagination. One musical he fell in love with was "Falsettos," by William Finn—James Lapine co-wrote the book—which begins with a song called "Four Jews in a Room Bitching": "I'm bitching. He's bitching / They're bitching. We're bitching / Bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch." The song plays with cultural stereotypes using humor and I-told-you-you-didn't-tell-me forthrightness. "The work had its own personality," Jackson said. "It wasn't trying to imitate anyone else." He admired Sondheim for staying true to his voice as an urban gay man. Sondheim's mentor, Oscar Hammerstein II, once advised him not to write songs about nature—after all, he wasn't Hammerstein. Sondheim was, as Jackson put it, "an urbane, witty New Yorker, and a puzzle master. And so he's going to write lyrics that are elliptical and sort of circle back, and are clever and super smart and dark and ironic and all that stuff. That's him."



In college, Jackson wanted to write for the soaps. "I subscribed to *Soap Opera Digest*," he recalled. "I interned at ABC Daytime." When he graduated, he applied for a job at CBS Daytime, and to N.Y.U.'s graduate program in musical-theatre writing. "If I had gotten that job in the soaps, I wouldn't be writing musicals," he said. In grad school, a Black gay student performed a song he'd written about a one-night stand—an assignation that made him feel guilty, in the song, and ask the Lord for forgiveness. As Jackson listened, he wrote down a line in his notebook about "All those Black gay boys I knew who chose to go on back to the Lord." He combined this idea with Tori Amos's "Pretty Good Year," which led him to write "Memory Song," the first tune for what turned out to be "A Strange Loop."

Jackson was not ambitious to get his work produced, because he didn't think it stood a chance. But he was artistically ambitious, and, as his compositions grew, so did Jackson. (Therapy helped.) In 2006, the producer Maria Manuela Goyanes invited Jackson to perform a cabaret act at Ars Nova, including some early songs and parts from a monologue he wrote between college and grad school called "Why I Can't Get Work." (He called the piece "Fast Food Town.") The speaker in the monologue aches to win the acknowledgment of white theatre powerhouses such as Tony Kushner and John Patrick Shanley, and equates gay sex with death even as he longs for it:

> It's just like the other day this guy tries to pick me up while I'm waiting for the 6 on my way to rehearsal for this play I wrote and my first thought is "What if he's got AIDS? Condoms are bullshit, what if he's a gift giver who's trying to lure you somewhere to infect you on purpose?" And this is all me in my glorious gay 20s when I should be laughing AIDS in the face and daring it to come after me. But this is not what they taught me in high school health. This is not what Dad taught me about his cousin Melvin who apparently ran around on his wife for years smoking crack and fucking men on the DL and got AIDS. . . . So even though in that moment waiting for the 6 I think, "Maybe he's just into you," I think right after that, "He probably just wants to gay bash you." So that's where I'm at; a bitter custody battle: thought versus thought and thought wins.

But a monologue is not a musical. While developing "Fast Food Town," Jackson created a new main character, named Usher. The show was going to be a mashup of Jackson's writing and Liz Phair's, but, when he reached out, Phair told him that he should write his own songs. His friend the director Stephen Brackett suggested casting Usher's world entirely with gay Black male actors, no matter the role. In 2015, Jackson learned that the trans actor Shakina Nayfack was starting the Musical Theatre Factory, where artists could develop new work, and she invited him to join. Folks began to get it; Usher's experiences paralleled their own. The times were catching up with Jackson. Days of our lives, indeed. The young writer won a Dramatists Guild fellowship, a Jonathan Larson Grant, and a Lincoln Center Emerging Artist Award. The Broadway producer Barbara Whitman, who was annoyed that the New York theatre scene wasn't staging more work like Jackson's, committed to helping him produce the show. A number of theatres lined up to stage it. The Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Jackie Sibblies Drury told me in an e-mail that one reason she loved "A Strange Loop" was that it was a "relief to see work that was so self-interested—not in a shady way. . . . It felt to me like a piece that wasn't strictly autobiographical but was interested in the self . . . in exploring his Blackness, his queerness, his communities—familial, artistic, sexual—and how they see a person like him." She added that, also, "it is really fucking funny."

On a recent afternoon, I visited the rehearsal hall above the Second Stage theatre, where the company was finishing up a run-through. After the actors were dismissed, Lileana Blain-Cruz, the show's director, met me with a head of blond Cuban twists; on top of that, set at a jaunty angle, she wore a bright-pink beanie. Blain-Cruz was relaxed, authoritative, and ready to laugh. On one side of the loft-like space there were images tacked up on the wall: the actress and comedian Jackée Harry on the cover of an old *Jet* magazine, Ruth Bader Ginsburg wearing black gloves, a young Whitney Houston perched on a car, Diana Ross under a cloud of big-ass hair. These are just a few of the major reference points for "White Girl in Danger," which has more than its share of diva drama.

The show is more sonically complex than "A Strange Loop"; Jackson makes elaborate use of the chorus. In "A Strange Loop," he had to invent a form to tell a story that had never been told before. In "White Girl in Danger," he's using the conventions of a preëxisting form—the soaps—which allows him to be looser. "The piece is larger than life, but

it's still life," Blain-Cruz said. Her challenge as a director has been to "keep the life part of it, the truth part of it, the 'what happens next'—all that sex and drama and passion and feeling—part of it that made those ladies watching their stories in the afternoon feel so alive." Because of the success of "A Strange Loop," Jackson could work on "White Girl in Danger" without having to live with roommates or hold down a boring job. After checking on a note with the stage manager, Jackson, who was dressed in a gray shirt and dark trousers, joined me and Blain-Cruz. He began to explain a soap structure, describing a plot in "As the World Turns," which aired on CBS from 1956 to 2010:

JACKSON: Lily Snyder was adopted by wealthy Lucinda Walsh, right? But it turned out her birth mother was Iva Snyder.

ALS: The sister?

JACKSON: No. I forget what Iva's relationship is. Iva was raped when she was thirteen by Josh.

BLAIN-CRUZ: Oh, no!

JACKSON: And then she gave birth to Lily. But Iva was Josh's cousin. So, Lily is a kind of child of incest.

ALS: First cousin, or second cousin?

JACKSON: That I don't know. There's this whole big thing about Lily being wealthy. And then the love of her life, Holden, is related to the cousin that raped her mom. And then, on top of all that, years later, they reconnect, and Iva had given birth to twins.

ALS: Yes.

JACKSON: Rose, who got adopted and grew up in Atlantic City and became a showgirl. And yet somehow she came to Oakdale. And then it was Rose and Lily. Twins. Coincidentally.

BLAIN-CRUZ: And that's what I kind of live for, the retelling of the crazy.

When I visited, "White Girl in Danger" was due to start previews in a couple of weeks. It had been a long process. Watching the run-throughs was like sitting inside a movie time wipe—some of the actors were different from when I first saw the show. I heard, too, how the music had deepened. But the key players remained the same: those characters which, whether they knew it or not, had started to take form subconsciously all those years ago, back in Detroit.

Some people think that O. J. Simpson killed the soaps: having real-life drama, in real time, made the shows feel obsolete. The world was subsumed by Lifetime movies, which borrowed soap plotlines, and reality TV. Jackson will, if asked, guide you through soap history with enthusiasm, and he will also let you know that he's never given up on the form. He'd like to eventually write a sequel to "White Girl in Danger." He's planning a musical adaptation of the 2007 movie "Teeth," based on a fantasy about vagina dentata, and a television project about how sex can be viewed positively within a Black context. In the rehearsal room above the Second Stage, however, he was focussed on "White Girl in Danger." Blain-Cruz was excited by the challenge of trying to make soaps matter to a contemporary audience. "I feel what's so satisfying about the work is that Michael is deeply invested in pop culture, and deeply invested in the history of media," she said. "So he knows how to take the things that are familiar for us, the things that we've in some ways dismissed as not even anything to pay attention to, and he makes us pay attention to them."

It was the "dismissed as not even anything to pay attention to" that made me recall all those young men and women of color who surrounded Jackson outside the Lyceum. In some way, the musical had given them not just a show but an audience; talking to Jackson, and taking selfies with him, was a way of feeling seen, and less forgotten. This was an aspect of the show that had moved the great star Bette Midler, too. She told me, by e-mail, "I thought it was all the things people always say; 'Brave, bold, goes where no one has ever gone, blah blah blah', but actually, in spite of all this, or in addition to all this, it also manages to be hysterically funny, illuminating, revelatory, moving, remarkably musical, heartbreaking and ultimately so human, that it makes you want to weep, not just for Usher, but for all of us. And I did. I still can't understand how he did it." Midler went backstage to meet Jackson after the show and offer her congratulations. Afterward, as they walked out onto the street, where a crowd had gathered, Midler noticed that his glasses were splotched, and, expressing Mom concern, took them off and wiped the lenses, using a bit of her dress, like a hankie. ♦



"Abigail! Nooooooooo!"

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE FOG

Adoptees reckon with the secrets of the adoption industry and its emotional cost.

BY LARISSA MacFARQUHAR

On August 1, 1966, a baby girl is born in Norfolk, Virginia. Her mother names her Melanie Lynn. She is placed in foster care for two months to make sure she has no medical issues. Then she is adopted by a couple who live a hundred miles away.

On a day in 1970, a baby girl is born in Incheon, South Korea, a port city just west of Seoul. Her mother names her Eun-hee. Eun-hee lives with her mother and her mother's parents in Incheon until she is three years old. When she is nearly six, she is sent to adoptive parents in America.

On September 18, 1985, a baby girl is born in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Her mother does not give her a name. The mother relinquishes her at birth to an adoption agency. The mother is asked if she wants to hold the baby and says no.

One evening in December, 2021, Deanna Doss Shrodes had come home from work. The TV was tuned to a news segment about the oral arguments at the Supreme Court for the case that challenged Roe v. Wade. Deanna is a pastor and a director of women's ministries at a Pentecostal church in Florida. She is opposed to abortion, and was glad that Roe might soon be overturned. But then Amy Coney Barrett asked about "safe haven" laws, which permit a mother who doesn't want to keep her baby to drop it off anonymously in a deposit box at a hospital or a fire station. Why, Barrett wanted to know, didn't safe-haven laws remove the burden that was allegedly being imposed upon a woman who couldn't obtain an abortion? The woman wouldn't be forced to be a parent, and the baby could be adopted. At this point, Deanna became so upset that she stopped listening.

Deanna is adopted, and she has spent much of her life grappling with the emotional consequences of that. She believes that a child who starts life in a box will never know who they are, unless they manage somehow to track down their anonymous parents. It distresses her that many of her fellow-Christians, such as Barrett, talk about adoption as the win-win solution to abortion, as though once a baby is adopted that is the end of the story. If someone says of Deanna that she was adopted, she corrects them and says that she *is* adopted. Being adopted is, to her, as to many adoptees, a profoundly different way of being human, one that affects almost everything about her life.

"I explain to friends that in order to be adopted you first have to lose your entire family," Deanna said. "And they'll say, Well, yes, but if it happens to a newborn what do they know? You were adopted, get over it. Would you tell your friend who lost their family in a car accident, Get over it? No. But as an adoptee you're expected to be over it because, O.K., that happened to you, but this wonderful thing also happened, and why can't you focus on the wonderful thing?"

There are disproportionate numbers of adoptees in psychiatric hospitals and addiction programs, given that they are only about two per cent of the population. A study found that adoptees attempt suicide at four times the rate of other people.

"A big thing that adoptees get frustrated by is when people say that adopting kids is no different," Deanna said. "You know, if they say, I don't feel any differently about my biological kids than my adopted kids, I'm just a mom, we're just a family. That is not true." How many parents tell their adopted children, I love you as if you were my own? And how many of those children wonder, Am I not your own?

One day, when she was very little, Deanna was playing hide-and-seek with her sister. She wriggled underneath her parents' bed to hide, and in the darkness she felt something hard and cold, made of metal. She pulled it out from under the bed and saw that it was a box. She opened it, and found a piece of paper with her name on it. The language on the paper was confusing, but she understood that it said that Melanie Lynn Alley, born in 1966, had become Deanna Lynn Doss.

Melanie Lynn Alley was another person, but also, somehow, herself. Deanna already knew that she was adopted, but she hadn't known that she'd had another name. Was Melanie Lynn Alley the person she would have become if her birth mother had kept her? It felt as though Melanie was a part of her, but a part that she couldn't see, that existed next to her, or behind her, like the ghost of a twin.

"Some people have no issues at all with being an adoptee," Deanna said. "They're happy as a lark. They don't feel the pain, for whatever reason. But there are others who haven't come out of the fog, or they don't think they're in a fog, or whatever. And they join one of the adoptee groups and they go, What's wrong with all you people? I'm so happy, I'm so grateful, I don't see what you're upset about. That will create an explosion of people going, Why are you even here? This is a support group, not a place to come and talk about how happy you are."

"Coming out of the fog" means different things to different adoptees. It can mean realizing that the obscure, intermittent unhappiness or bewilderment you have felt since childhood is not a personality trait but something shared by others who are adopted. It can mean realizing that you were a good, hardworking child partly out of a need to prove that your parents were right to choose you, or a sense that it was your job to make your parents happy, or a fear that if you weren't good your parents would give you away, like the first ones did. It can mean coming to feel that not knowing anything about the



“In order to be adopted you first have to lose your entire family,” Deanna Doss Shrodes says.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GRAEME MITCHELL

people whose bodies made yours is strange and disturbing. It can mean seeing that you and your parents were brought together not only by choice or Providence but by a vast, powerful, opaque system with its own history and purposes. Those who have come out of the fog say that doing so is not just disorienting but painful, and many think back longingly to the time before they had such thoughts.

Some adoptees dislike the idea of the fog, because it suggests that an adoptee who doesn't feel the way that out-of-the-fog adoptees do must be deluded. And it's true; many out-of-the-fog adoptees do believe that. They point out that a person can feel fine about their adoption for most of their life and then some event—pregnancy, the death of a parent—will reveal to them that they were not fine at all. But there are many others who reject this—who aren't interested in searching for their birth parents, and think about their adoption only rarely in the course of their life.

Although she found her birth mother decades ago, Deanna feels she came out of the fog more recently, because she hadn't realized how many other adoptees were going through the same things she was. She and her husband had gone to see a movie about a girl who finds out that she is adopted at the age of nineteen. Deanna wept with fury during the movie, and when she discovered afterward that her husband didn't understand what she was crying about, despite having been married to her since she was twenty years old, she went online and discovered that there were dozens, maybe hundreds, of Web sites on which adoptees were talking to each other.

It was a wild ferment of rage and pain, support groups and manifestos. Some adoptees were posting about lies and secrets: altered documents and birth dates; paperwork they'd been told was lost in a fire or a flood (so many fires and floods); birth parents they'd been told were dead but weren't; things they'd been told about their past that the person who told them couldn't possibly know. Others were arguing about whether there was such a thing as a primal wound—whether a baby bonded in utero with its mother and felt abandoned if it were given up, even if it were handed over in the delivery room. Some had found their birth parents and were in the middle of whatever that was; some were still searching and needed advice about DNA or genealogy; many were waiting to search until their adoptive parents died, for fear of hurting them. They were looking for pieces of their lives or their selves that were missing, or had been falsified or renamed, trying to fit them to the pieces they had.

There isn't a single adoptee movement—the community is too heterogeneous for that. There is the older generation, the so-called Baby Scoop Era adoptees, such as Deanna—the mostly white children of the four million or so unmarried women who gave babies up for adoption between the end of the Second World War and the passing of Roe v. Wade. Many of those adoptions were forced, and almost all were closed—the identities of the birth parents and the adoptive names of their children were kept secret, making it very difficult for the parents and the children to find one another. There is the youngest generation, some of whom have open adoptions and have always known their birth parents, posting on adoptee TikTok. For some reason, it seems the vast majority of adoptees in the forums online are women.

One thing almost everyone agrees on is that adult adoptees should have the unrestricted right to see their original birth certificates, rather than only the "amended" ones with the names of their



adoptive parents (but this is the law in only a dozen states). Many adoptees condemn international adoption, which cuts children off from their native cultures more drastically than any other kind and makes it unlikely that they will ever find, much less know, their birth parents. (Rates of international adoption by Americans have plummeted in recent years, down ninety-three per cent since 2004.) Some adoptees want to end adoption altogether, although most believe that there are situations in which it is the best option. More want to end transracial adoption—to return adoption, in some ways, to its modern beginnings.

A hundred years ago, adoption agencies tried to match children and parents so precisely that they could pass as a biological family. If parents wished to keep the adoption a secret, from the child or from the world, they could plausibly do it. Then, in the nineteen-fifties, some agencies set about persuading white parents to adopt children of color, with campaigns such as "Operation Brown Baby." The campaigns were successful—by the start of this decade, nearly three-quarters of adoptees of color were adopted into white families. Four generations of parents loved children of races different from their own. In much of the adoption world, whose foundational premise is that love is stronger than biology, colorblindness still seemed like a precious and viable ideal. But then the adopted children grew up and some of them—though by no means all—believed that love was not enough.

Many adoptees feel that the way we understand adoption has been dominated by the perspectives of adoptive parents. Birth parents are less often heard from, though almost anyone can understand the grief of a parent who gives up a child for adoption (one study found more than ninety per cent of those who are denied an abortion keep their child rather than give it up). But understanding how adoption can affect an adoptee is more difficult, because adoptees, and the various kinds of adoptions, are so different from one another.

You can divide adoption into three main categories: plausibly invisible adoptions, such as Deanna's, in which a child is adopted by parents of the same race; transracial adoptions; and international adoptions. Each of these has its own complexities and problems, and each is now going through a new reckoning.

Joy Lieberthal grew up just outside New York City; she had three younger sisters, all adopted from Korea, like herself. Her father was Jewish, her mother Catholic; Joy and her sisters were raised Catholic. When Joy first met her parents, she spoke no English, but she went straight into first grade and learned the language in three months. Once she

spoke English, her mother would tell her stories about how Joy had behaved when she first arrived from Korea—how, when her father came home from work, she ran to pull off his jacket and shoes and take his briefcase and sit him down and give him a massage and sing for him. How, when her mother was mopping the kitchen floor, Joy gestured for her to stop, that she would do it—she ran to fetch a rag and scrubbed the floor on her knees until it was so clean you could eat off it, then wrung out the cloth so thoroughly that when she was done the cloth was dry.

Joy's earliest memory was of leaving her mother's parents' house in Korea. She remembered being in the back seat of a car, banging on the window and crying, as somebody in the car rolled the window up. She could see her grandparents standing outside their house, also crying, waving goodbye. She knew that later she had lived in an orphanage for a year and a half, but she didn't remember it well. She remembered that it had been cold—it was in the mountains. She remembered a river where she had washed her clothes and cleaned rice. She could picture the room she had slept in, with sunlight coming in.

Because Joy was nearly six by the time she left for America, she remembered the journey. First she had been taken from the orphanage to stay for a few months in a Buddhist temple in Seoul, where nuns had trained her for her new life. They taught her how to greet her American father at the door, how to give massages, how to wash clothes and floors, how to take care of younger children, how to sing for adults. She didn't know what her life in America was going to be like, and it seemed that the nuns didn't know, either, so they prepared her for whatever might happen.

On the day she was to leave for America, she wore a floral dress with a peacock on it. She was given a bag that contained a pair of pajamas, a pair of shoes, a notebook, a photo album that her American parents had sent her with pictures of themselves, and a gift that she was to present to her parents when she met them. The gift was a white box containing a little drawstring coin bag made of rainbow-striped *saekdong* silk. There were a few other Korean kids who were on the same flight, including a little girl who would become her younger sister. One of the adults with them at the airport told her to be good, to honor her parents, and to make Korea proud.



"Great seeing you! If you're ever in New York, in my neighborhood, and on my exact block, let's get together!"

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She and the other kids walked out onto the tarmac and the plane's engine was going and it was incredibly loud. She hated loud noises, and she covered her ears and started to cry. On the plane, her ears hurt from the pressure, and she threw up on herself, then threw up again, and her nose started to bleed. The flight to J.F.K. was twenty-six hours long, with a layover in Anchorage. She didn't remember arriving in New York, but she had seen a photo her parents took when she got off the plane, her peacock dress torn, a bloody Kleenex sticking out of her nose, her hair crooked. Her new parents were scary. They had blue eyes—she had never seen blue eyes. Her new sister ran away in the airport and everyone was busy trying to catch her.

She didn't remember the car ride back to her parents' house, but she remembered waking up when they got there, and getting out of the car carrying a string of lollipops and a new doll. She and her sister were led up the stairs, and at the top was their bedroom—yellow, with patchwork bedspreads. She took off her clothes and her sister's clothes and folded them and helped her sister to put on her pajamas. They had never slept in a bed before and kept falling off, but they slept for a long time.

Her Korean name was listed as Kim Young-ja on the paperwork her parents were given, but they named her Joy. In fact, Kim Young-ja was not Joy's original name, either—her name was Song Eun-hee. What had happened, as Joy understood it later, was that the director of the orphanage had originally promised Joy's parents a different girl, but had been unable to deliver her. Not wanting to lose the customers, the director said that by great good fortune she had found a second girl with the same name and birth date as the first, so Joy came to her parents with falsified documents.

Name of the child: Kim, Young-Ja
Sex: Female
Date of Birth: September 25, 1970 (estimated)
Place of Birth: Unknown
Natural Parents: Unknown
Case Number: 76-375/LSJ
Physical appearance: The child is cute and

bright with an elongated face, tall height, slender figure, light complexion, medium black eyes, well-shaped nose, big ears, and clean body. . . . The children have been growing healthily without any disease. . . . The children are completely toilet trained.

Joy was a good child who took care of her younger sisters. The sisters were close, but they never really talked about being adopted. Joy didn't wonder about her birth mother, because she had been told she was dead. She was smart and worked hard in school, though there were almost no other Asian kids there, and she was bullied. She was a cautious child who tried not to be noticed.

There was something wrong with the baby. Her legs were rigid, and one of her feet was twisted sideways. A doctor in Chattanooga gave a diagnosis of spastic quadriplegia, a kind of cerebral palsy, and said that she might never walk.

The agency transferred the baby to a foster home, and the foster parents named her Jocelyn Kate. The foster parents were young white evangelical Christians. They already had two biological children but got certified as foster parents out of a sense of mission. They fell in love with the baby. They held her and touched her and rocked her and talked to her. The baby's tiny legs were so stiff that the foster mother had to spend several hours every day massaging them, rotating her hips and stretching out her knees, to loosen them enough to change her diaper. The foster parents wanted very badly to adopt the baby, but they had no health insurance and couldn't afford the medical care they'd been told she would need for the rest of her life. They had her for a year.

Meanwhile, the agency was looking for adoptive parents. At first they tried for a Black family, because the baby was Black, but they couldn't find one that could take on the baby's medical needs. After a few months, they broadened their search. David and Teresa Burt, a white couple who had already adopted one baby with cerebral palsy, were able to take a second with similar requirements. The agency wrote that their fee was normally five thousand dollars, but since this baby had special needs they would reduce the price to fifteen hundred. If that was too much, they would take a thousand.

The Burts lived in Bellingham, Washington, a small city north of Seattle. They wanted a big family, and, influenced by the Zero Population Growth movement, they decided to adopt. They had one biological child, a daughter, when they were in their early twenties, and then David had a vasectomy.

The first child they adopted, in 1982, was a one-year-old white girl with a diagnosis of cerebral palsy, who had been born weighing less than two pounds. About a year after that, they attended an event in Seattle called Kids Fest, sponsored by the state adoption office—children played, and if a prospective parent saw a child they were interested in they could try to interact with them. The Burts adopted a white boy they saw there.

A couple of years later, Teresa saw, in a binder of kids waiting to be adopted, a photo of a Black baby girl with cerebral palsy. The baby was cute, but it was the diagnosis that caught Teresa's eye. They knew how to take care of a kid like that; they were already set up with the equipment. When the Burts arrived to collect their new daughter from the foster home in Chattanooga, they discovered that the foster parents had named her Jocelyn Kate. But the Burts thought of her as Angela, because that was the name a caseworker had put on the paperwork, and they decided to call her that. Later, the Burts went to Kids Fest again and adopted a second Black child, and a couple of years after that they took in a pair of Black sisters from foster care in Kentucky. As it turned out, it seemed that Angela did not have spastic quadriplegia but a much milder form of cerebral palsy. Her twisted-up foot slowly turned downward, and by the time she was four she was running as well as any other child.

Bellingham was a very white place. Some remembered it having been a sundown town as late as the nineteen-seventies: anyone who wasn't white had to leave town by nightfall. It seemed to Angela that there were almost no Black kids in her elementary school. The family stood out in other ways as well—children of different races, some with visible disabilities, and sometimes a foster kid as well. There were always physical therapists coming and going in the house, and caseworkers with clipboards. One neighbor thought it was a group home. People in the gro-



"Do you want the side of the bed with no outlet or the side with the impossible-to-reach outlet?"

cery store would ask Teresa where she got all those children, and would say she was a saint for taking them in. Some people called her Mother Teresa. Teresa would reject these sorts of compliments, but they still made Angela feel like a charity case.

When Angela was a child, the only place she spent any real time with Black people other than her siblings was a summer program she went to with other adoptees. At home, she had Black people on TV. She saw that Magic Johnson's big smile looked kind of like hers and wondered if he was her birth father. She wondered if her birth mother could be Brandy, from "Cinderella." She asked her parents about her birth parents and they gave her her adoption paperwork.

> Mother: Deborah Ann ______ was born on ______ 11, 1954. She is 4'11" tall, weighs 160 pounds has black hair with some streaks of gray and dark brown eyes. She has a large bone structure and a medium complexion. She has a religious background of a Baptist affiliation and her nationality background is Afro-American. Deborah is presently residing in a government housing project in the Chattanooga area and is currently being supported on the State Welfare System. Deborah has had four prior pregnancies all of which were live births.

She read this over and over. At first, all she thought about was her birth mother. When she was older, the fact that she had four siblings came into focus. Deborah's fourth child, a daughter, had also been given up for adoption, and Teresa asked the agency to contact her family, to see if the girls could be pen pals, but the family said no.

Deanna grew up next to Jones Creek, just outside Baltimore. Her father worked at a post office downtown, her mother worked at the V.A. in Fort Howard. They couldn't have kids, so they adopted two girls from different birth mothers, Deanna and her younger sister. The Dosses were conservative Pentecostal Christians, and their lives revolved around the church. Deanna often fell asleep under a pew during revival services that lasted into the night. When she was a child, sitting alone in her grandmother's back yard, she realized that she had a calling to the ministry.

All through childhood, she wondered about her birth parents—who they were, where they lived, whether they ever thought about her. Whenever she was in a crowd of people, like at a baseball game in the city, she would scan the faces to see if there was anyone who looked familiar. Sometimes she stood outside looking at the moon and would wonder if her birth mother, wherever she was, was looking at the same moon. Every now and then, she asked her mother about her birth parents, but she felt that the subject made her uncomfortable, so she mostly kept her questions to herself.



She went to Valley Forge, a Christian college, and met her future husband, Larry Shrodes. In 1989, Deanna gave birth to their first child, and she realized that this was the first time she had seen and touched a blood relative since her own birth. She understood more than she had before what it would be like to give up a baby. Suddenly, finding her birth mother felt urgent.

She started going to meetings of the Adoptees Liberty Movement Association at a local Unitarian church. The organization had been founded in 1971 by an adoptee named Florence Fisher; Fisher had been in a car crash, and her last thought before impact was I'm going to die and I don't know who I am. Deanna also contacted the agency that had brokered her adoption. She was told that she could petition the county court to open her records to a "confidential intermediary," who would contact her birth mother on her behalf. She agreed, and before long the intermediary called to say that she had spoken to Deanna's birth mother. The intermediary had told her that she would be proud of how Deanna had turned out—college educated, a pastor. The birth mother had said that she was sure she would be proud of Deanna, but she didn't think that Deanna would be proud of her. She didn't want to meet.

Standing holding the phone, Deanna felt her legs weaken. She thought that maybe her being a pastor had put her birth mother off—people always thought pastors were going to judge them. If only the intermediary hadn't mentioned that. She asked if she could send her a letter, but the intermediary said no, that wasn't allowed. Her birth mother had thirty days to change her mind. For thirty days, Deanna pleaded with God every way she knew. She fasted and prayed. But the intermediary called and told her that the answer was still no.

To be rejected by her birth mother a second time was almost more than she could take. But then, two years later, a pastor at her church told Deanna to pray about her mother again. This time, she felt God telling her that, although her birth mother had said no to the intermediary, she had not said no to *her*. Deanna restarted her search.

It was the early nineteen-nineties—there was no Internet that she had ready access to. But one day when she was home with the flu she saw Joseph J. Culligan, a private investigator, on a talk show. He had written a book, "You, Too, Can Find Anybody," and guests on the show testified that, thanks to the book, they had used public information to find people for less than twenty dollars. Deanna sent Larry straight out to buy it. There were all kinds of techniques in the book, all kinds of records you could search for addresses if you had a last name—liens, leases, bankruptcies, writs of garnishment. You could write to the D.M.V. or check abandoned-property files. The best source, though, was the Death Master File, which contained the Social Security Administration's death records since 1962. The Salvation Army's missing-persons program told her that they knew of a source in California who could gain access to the Death Master File for only thirteen dollars. She knew that her birth mother had grown up near Richmond, Virginia. She called California and asked for records of any man in Richmond with her birth mother's maiden name who had died within a certain period of time.

The information arrived in the mail a few weeks later—pages and pages of names. She wrote to libraries all over the city and ordered obituaries for every one of the names, looking for her mother's father. From her adoption



Angela Tucker believes transracial adoption should happen only as a last resort.

paperwork she knew that her maternal grandfather had been an auto mechanic with six children, and that her birth mother was the youngest. The last obituary she received in the mail was of an auto mechanic who had had six children. That gave her her birth mother's current, married name. She dialled directory inquiries, got her mother's number, and called her.

A machine picked up and she heard her birth mother's voice for the first time. It was a deep, Southern voice. Deanna started crying. She called over and over. Larry came home, took one look at her, and knew instantly what had happened. At the time, they were both working as pastors at a church in Dayton, Ohio, and had two toddlers. Deanna called that evening to make sure that her birth mother wasn't out of town; when she answered the phone, Deanna hung up. She and Larry took the kids and drove through the night to Richmond.

Deanna had been imagining this moment for years, and she knew exactly what she was going to do. She knew she had to look at her birth mother's face at least once, so she wasn't going to risk calling first. She had brought a camera—she would ask to take a photograph of her birth mother if it was to be the only time she saw her. The next day, in the hotel room, she changed clothes several times and settled on a pink suit. She waited until evening, walked up to her birth mother's house, and knocked on the door.

The woman who opened the door was smiling, and blond, which took Deanna aback—the adoption paperwork had said that her hair was dark, like Deanna's. Deanna said, Please don't be afraid, but my name is Deanna, and I think you know who I am. The woman stopped smiling. For a long time, she stood in the doorway and stared at her. Deanna asked if she could come in.

Her birth mother gestured for her to sit at the kitchen table, and began nervously moving around from stove to counter and back, making coffee and picking things up and putting them down again. She said, I know you don't understand why I made the decision I made. She started crying, and began to tell Deanna about all the mistakes she had made in her life and how sorry she was for all of them. She told her that she had made a lot of bad choices, including her relationship with Deanna's father. She had failed in her relationship with her other children's father, and now she was divorced. She listed other things she was ashamed of—things she'd done and things that had happened in her family.

Deanna felt God telling her, Say nothing, say nothing, just let her talk. She was terrified that something would break the spell and get her kicked out. She kept thinking, I'm still here, she hasn't kicked me out, I'm still here.

When Deanna's birth mother was pregnant, her parents had sent her to the Florence Crittenton Home for unwed mothers, in Norfolk, a hundred miles away. People had treated her like a whore, and she felt like a whore. Her family was mortified by her situation, and had told her that she must keep her pregnancy a secret or she would be disowned. She was told that giving up the baby for adoption and pretending the whole thing had never happened was her only chance to redeem herself. If she gave the baby up, it would be raised in a decent home, and she would be able to pass herself off as a marriageable woman. It was the right thing to do.

There was also no other option. The baby's father had refused to marry her or help her. While she was alone in the home for unwed mothers, he just went on with his life. She lied on the adoption agency's paperwork: she gave them a fake name for him and a fake job; she said he worked in a drugstore. She

wanted to make sure that the child would never find him, or he her.

After a long time, Deanna's birth mother stopped talking, and Deanna said, We've all made mistakes, but I went to Hell and back to find you, and I would go to Hell and back to find you again. At that point, her birth mother seemed to realize that Deanna was not going to reject her. She stood up from her side of the table, came over, wrapped her arms around Deanna's head, and wailed.

When Joy went to college, at first she mostly had white friends. Then, in her second year, she became friends with a group of Black students and began to understand herself as a person of color. Later still, she made some Asian friends, and some Korean international students asked her to start an Asian student union. She felt like a fraud, as if she weren't really Asian, but the international students accepted her as such, and thought it was fun to fill in the gaps in her knowledge. They wanted to know whether she could use chopsticks, how high her spice tolerance was. She ate with them and found that her mouth still watered when she smelled kimchi. She tried to teach herself Koreanness. She put on a fashion show, for which she learned how to wear *hanbok* and do a fan dance.

After she graduated, Joy decided to visit Korea. She wrote to the orphanage where she had lived and asked if they would take her on as a volunteer. They told her she was welcome. When she arrived, in the fall of 1993, everything felt very foreign. She spoke no Korean. Things smelled bad. The water was cold. What was she doing there?

She tried to compare the orphanage to her memories of it twenty years earlier. She remembered being cold all the time; now the building had indoor plumbing and central heating. She saw that the river she'd remembered washing clothes in was actually a stream. The director of the orphanage, who'd been there when Joy was a child and was now in her nineties, asked her, Are you here to meet your birth mother? Joy said, No, she's dead, and the director said, Oh, yes, right, right, right.

After a few months at the orphanage, she felt something in her shift. She started to understand more Korean, and to speak it. She saw how hard the children worked—in school, and on the orphanage's farm—and how much disciplinary beating and humiliation the younger ones endured at the hands of the older ones. There was little warmth or affection in the orphanage, no joking or playing games. They worked, watched TV, ate, slept. There were only a few staff members for more than fifty children, from little kids to seventeen-year-olds, and some seemed to have no interest in the children.

She also realized that none of the kids were actually orphans. They knew who their parents were, and most of them went home on national holidays. The orphanage was a combination of government boarding school and foster care—there was no American-style foster care in Korea. Usually there had been some kind of crisis in the family, like illness, or divorce, or poverty, that meant the parents couldn't take care of their child. Most of the children thought their stay in the orphanage would be temporary, but often it wasn't. Many became estranged from their birth families and couldn't find them when they aged out.

The children were unlikely to be adopted—many fewer Korean children were being adopted abroad by then. The first wave of adoptions, after the Korean War—mostly the biracial children of Korean women and American soldiers—was long over. Adoptions had risen to a peak in the seventies and eighties. When Joy was a child, the Korean government had encouraged them, as a way of ridding itself of financially burdensome children, and as a kind of soft diplomacy with the West. But at the time of the 1988 Summer Olympics, in Seoul, the exporting of so many children became a source of embarrassment to Korea, and since then the numbers had declined.

Several young people who had lived in the orphanage when Joy was there came back regularly, to visit. They had hated their time there, but now the orphanage kids were their family, and the orphanage their home. At first they assumed that Joy had been the lucky one—she could speak English, she had been to college, she lived in New York. But once her Korean was fluent enough she told them how lonely it had been growing up in a town with no Korean people. They couldn't fathom a place with no Korean people; they couldn't fathom that she would question whether she was Korean or not, or not know what that meant.

Toward the end of her time there, a woman who worked in the director's office told Joy that her birth mother was looking for her. Joy said that wasn't possible, her birth mother was dead. The woman said, No, it's true—an investigator had called on her behalf. Joy said, If she is my mother, she will have a photograph of me. The investigator had a photograph—it was a picture of a three-year-old girl, the age Joy was when she had last seen her mother. As soon as Joy saw the photograph, she knew it was her. She felt the blood leaving her face. She didn't know what to do. She suggested that she could sit in a park and the investigator could arrange for her birth mother to walk by her, so that she could see she was O.K. but they wouldn't have to speak. The investigator then told Joy that her mother was dying. Joy suspected that this was a ploy, but it forced her hand. She agreed to meet her mother the following week.

She dressed for the meeting in her usual outfit of jeans, a T-shirt, and Doc Martens, but a young woman who worked at the orphanage told her she couldn't possibly meet her birth mother looking like that. The woman took her to a store and made her buy a dress and stockings, and then, looking at her feet, said, You can't wear those, either. Joy made her way to the investigator's office, which turned out to be in a dirty back alley by a fish market. She picked her way through in her new shoes.

She sat in the investigator's office, and two older women came out from behind a screen. One sat next to her, the other across from her. She looked at the women and felt nothing. The woman across from her said, I don't think this is the right person. She asked Joy, Do you have a scar on your right leg? Joy said, Yes, I do—it's a burn mark from an iron. The woman started crying and said how sorry she was, that it was her fault, that she had told Joy not to go near the iron but she did, and then she didn't cry or tell anyone about her burn, because she was afraid of getting in trouble. Now the woman next to Joy

started to cry, and grasped her hand—and Joy realized that this woman, not the one who had been doing the talking, was her birth mother. The other woman was her mother's sister.

She didn't look at her mother and her mother didn't look at her. They both looked down. Joy asked her, What size are your feet? They had the same size feet. The mother, still holding Joy's hand, took a ring off her own hand and slipped it onto Joy's finger. She said, I have been wearing this ring waiting for the day I would be able to give it to you. She said she had been looking for Joy for twenty-one years. Then Joy started to cry.

She and her mother spent the weekend together. Joy had a half brother who was seventeen, and who had been told of her existence only days before the meeting, but he welcomed her easily. With her mother, it was harder. She didn't talk much, or look Joy in the eye. They paged through photo albums, and there was a photograph of the mother at the age of twenty-four, Joy's age, and she looked exactly like her. Joy said, I want to tell you about my life. Do you have any questions? Her mother said, The last time I saw you, you were a three-year-old child. Now you are a grown woman. I don't know who you are.

Little by little, over years, Joy pieced together the story of her early childhood. Her mother and father had married young, before he had done his military service. For three years, while the father was in the military, Joy's mother lived with her parents in Incheon and raised Joy, then named Eun-hee. When Eun-hee's father came back from his service, he told her mother that he wanted a divorce. But, in Korea at that time, a child belonged to its father. Her father didn't particularly want the child, but she was his, so he took her to be raised by his parents.

For two years, Eun-hee's mother heard nothing from him. Meanwhile, she opened a small shop that sold cosmetics and things like cigarettes and gum. One day, Eun-hee's father walked into the shop to buy cigarettes. She demanded to know where her daughter was. He said he didn't know. She said, What do you mean you don't know? He said he couldn't talk, he had to work—he was a taxi-driver. She told him she would pay him a day's wages if he would stay with her and explain what had happened, and eventually he admitted that Eun-hee was in an orphanage.

The mother went straight to the orphanage, which was in another town. The people there told her she had the wrong orphanage, her daughter wasn't there. But she was convinced that she had the right one and kept going back, again and again, being told each time that it was the wrong orphanage, until finally she sat all day in the office of the orphanage school until the director came out. The director saw Eun-hee's mother, and the mother looked so much like Eun-hee that the director knew immediately who she was. The director told her that Eun-hee had indeed been in that orphanage, but she had been adopted and was no longer in Korea.

On one visit, years after they had met, Joy told her mother that she had always believed she was dead. Joy's mother said, Well, of course you thought I was dead. How else could a child make sense of being in an orphanage? Joy told her mother about her memory of leaving at three—of being in the car and seeing her grandmother and grandfather waving goodbye. But it turned out that her mind had altered the memory in a way that made it less painful. It wasn't your grandfather there standing with your grandmother, her mother said. It was me.

When Angela enrolled at Seattle Pacific University, a small Christian college, she realized how different it was to be a Black woman without her white parents around. She was perfectly comfortable on the predominantly white campus, but to the other students she looked out of place. There she met Bryan Tucker, a white man she would soon marry.



After she graduated, she took a job at Bethany Christian Services, the agency that had handled her adoption. She knew that caseworkers were allowed to see adoption paperwork and thought that maybe if she was an employee she would be able to see hers, but she wasn't. As a caseworker in infant placement, she saw other adoptees' original birth certificates all the time. When she arranged an adoption and ordered an amended birth certificate for the child, she felt treacherous, as though she were betraying the child whose origins she was concealing.

Working at Bethany and, later, with other agencies, she realized that, although their mission statements always talked about finding parents for children, in fact the agencies were in the business of finding children for parents. She saw that the birth mother was more or less disregarded once her baby had been handed over. In meetings, Angela would ask, Did anyone follow up with the birth mother? Did anyone teach her how to stop the breast milk from coming in so she isn't in pain? Her colleagues would sigh and say that this was a kind, sensitive thought, but they needed to think about the baby.

In most states, a birth mother had a short window of time—anywhere from a few months to ninety-six hours—in which she could change her mind. As the time passed, adoptive parents would ask Angela anxiously whether she had heard from the birth mother; then, when the window had closed, they would be relieved and happy, and, although Angela understood why they felt that way, she found it hard. She talked to adoptive parents about the merits of an open adoption, and most agreed in principle, but in practice they usually didn't make an effort to keep in touch with the birth mother, or they cut her off on the ground that seeing her might be upsetting for the child. There was little enforcement of openness in adoption—it was up to them.

Since Angela hadn't been able to see her original birth certificate at Bethany, she decided that she and Bryan would search for her birth mother on their own. She noticed that there were places in her paperwork where her birth mother's last name had not been whited out—it was Johnson. A Google search for "Deborah Johnson" in Tennessee returned several million results. She and Bryan called all the Deborah Johnsons they could find phone numbers for, dozens of them, but came up with nothing.

One night, Bryan was reading An-

MORNING SONG

It's a lucky day for me
if they are burning on the hill
the cut and fallen branches.
Fire consumes wood, smoke
consumes air. Lucky day
to see what burns and smokes
inside me. If I sit at the window
long enough, I know the moon
will come back. Is that enough then?
I don't mean is the moon enough,
but is the waiting for the moon enough?
I'm asking is the blue enough in Mary's robe
as she cradles her dead son in her lap.
It is Bellini's blue in the Accademia.
I stood for so long in front of it
that the guard, sitting on his little stool,
stopped whistling "Bridge
Over Troubled Water" and stared at me
in silence. But I stayed right where I was.
I had fallen in love with her,
that feeling of being nowhere
and everywhere at once, the way
they say the gods felt
when there were still gods. Meanwhile,
it's 6 A.M., and there is smoky light
on the mountain, the hill, the olive trees,
those two birds hiding under the neighbor's red tiles.
Serve us, they sing, us and us alone.
Are they swallows or swifts?
After all these years, I still don't know.

—*Jim Moore*

gela's paperwork again when he noticed something that she had, bafflingly, not focussed on in the hundreds of times she had read it: the first name of her biological father. Unlike her mother's name, it was unusual—Oterious. They could see by the size of the space that had been whited out that his last name was four letters long. They Googled "Oterious" and came up with one result in Tennessee: Oterious Bell. They searched on Spokeo, MySpace, Classmates.com, MyLife, and the International Soundex Reunion Registry, and finally found, on the Web site of a local radio station, a blog post, "Sandy Bell could use a lil help please." It seemed that Oterious (Sandy) Bell had become locally famous, making the rounds of bars and restaurants in Chattanooga, selling flowers. He'd just been in the hospital for a month and was struggling to pay his bills. Angela found a photo of him online. He looked exactly like her.

When she was growing up, Angela had barely thought about her birth father. But, having found him, she wanted to meet him—maybe he could tell her who her mother was. She decided to fly to Tennessee, along with Bryan and her parents. Her parents had supported her through her search, and she wanted them near her for this, although one of her deepest fears was that her birth mother would consider her a racial fraud. What would Deborah Johnson think if she turned up surrounded by white people, who were her family?

When she got out of the airport, the muggy air hit her and she started to sweat. She had allergies, and her lungs felt heavy and clotted. She had fantasized that Chattanooga would feel like home, but now she just wanted to get back inside. Suddenly there were Black people everywhere, but she thought she sounded ridiculous with her Pacific Northwest accent. That evening, she and Bryan went to a bar and told people she was looking for Sandy Bell. One person after another told her what a character he was, with blue suède shoes and a bicycle decorated with bells, flags, and ribbons. Somebody said that they thought his mother lived in the Mary Walker Towers.

The next morning, standing outside the towers, she heard a bicycle bell, and spotted a man on a bicycle wearing a straw cowboy hat with a toy sheriff's badge pinned to a faux-leather vest. She called out his name and told him why she was looking for him. He stared at her, and, reaching into his basket, presented her with a flower. Then he said, "It's like I'm looking in a mirror." Angela beckoned for everyone else, waiting a few yards off, to come and meet him, too. He invited them to return later to his mother's apartment and meet the rest of his family.

That evening, surrounded by uncles and aunts in Sandy's mother's tiny apartment, Angela asked Sandy about Deborah. He said he thought he knew where she lived now, and his brother Jay jumped up and suggested they drive by her house right away. Looking out of the car window in Deborah's neighborhood, Angela saw abandoned vehicles and brick shotgun houses. She wondered whether the neighborhood was safe to be in. She wondered how they looked to the people she saw sitting on their stoops—an S.U.V. and a minivan pulling up to the curb. Deborah's house had black garbage bags taped over its front window. Angela had thought that they were just going to look at the house, but suddenly she saw Sandy jump out of his brother's car and walk up to the front door. She's in there! a neighbor shouted from the next-door stoop. She hasn't come out for a while, but I've seen her lights come on.

The door opened and Deborah came out. She was short. Her hair was gray. Looking at the woman across the street, Angela felt as though she were in a fugue state. She opened the car door and walked over to the house. She said, Hi, my name is Angela. I think you may be



"I hate the person my targeted ads think I am."

my birth mother. The woman stood looking at the ground and said, I don't have children. I'm sorry, but I'm not the person you're looking for.

Angela had asked Bryan to film the encounter, because she knew she would be too overwhelmed to take it in. In their hotel room she played the twenty-eight-second clip of their meeting over and over for forty-five minutes, until Bryan asked her to stop.

Every adoption is a kind of conversion. When a child is issued an amended birth certificate, the child is, in one sense, born again. Christianity and adoption go back a long way. Not all proselytizing religions embrace adoption. Many Muslim countries prohibit it. A child can be taken in by a family acting as guardians, but new parents cannot take the place of the original ones. A child's lineage cannot be severed.

Deanna found it tricky being a Pentecostal Christian among adoptees. Her anti-abortion views had lost her some friends, although her closest adoptee friend was pro-choice and an agnostic. It was striking how pro-choice the adoptee community was. A refrain you heard again and again, in various forms, was, Do not make more people like me. A lot of adoptees had been told by their parents that they were adopted because God put them in the wrong tummy, or that God had planned adoption for them since the foundation of the world. Because of this, they had rejected God. Deanna had been asked over and over, How are you a Christian?

But, as hard as it was for her to be a Christian among adoptees, being an adoptee among Christians could be even harder. Adoption was celebrated in evangelical circles as a selfless act of loving rescue. If an evangelical expressed pain about her adoption, she was likely to be reminded that all Christians were adopted in Christ. Deanna found it frustrating when Christians wanted to stop abortions but wouldn't promote birth control.

Christians had driven much of the international-adoption business for decades. The mass adoption of foreign children by Americans had been started in the fifties by Harry and Bertha Holt, a Christian couple in Oregon whose motive was explicitly evangelical. They had chartered planes to transport children from Korea, sometimes more than a hundred per flight. But, in the more recent past, in the evangelical world, adoption had become much more important.

People often accused evangelicals of being not so much pro-life as pro-birth. Adoption was the answer to that: if there were unwanted babies, they would take them in. James 1:27—"Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble"—had become a central theological imperative, though nobody seemed to talk much about the widows. Many evangelicals who already had biological children adopted for religious reasons. Some even adopted children whom they knew were not orphans so that they could be raised as Christians, then return to their homes to convert others.

Congregations were told that millions of children were languishing in orphanages and might never have parents if they weren't rescued. Sometimes the price of adoption was referred to as "ransom," as though the child were a hostage. The numbers talked about grew larger and larger—after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti it was claimed that there were a million orphans there, a ninth of the total population. There were said to be a hundred and forty-three million, then a hundred and sixty-three million, then two hundred and ten million orphans in the world.

Christians responded to these terrible numbers by coming forward to adopt. But international adoptions were expensive—sometimes as much as fifty or sixty thousand dollars—and where there were lots of people willing to pay that kind of money for a child it was almost inevitable that corruption would follow. Deanna had read a book, "The Child Catchers," by Kathryn Joyce, which laid out in horrifying detail how it worked. For one thing, there was a certain motivated confusion about what an orphan was. In many countries, as in Korea, children were placed in orphanages not because they didn't have families but because their families weren't able to take care of them. Sometimes things would get better and the family would take them back. Most of the millions of orphans cited in the statistics were actually "single orphans,"

meaning they had one living parent.

In many cases, a child could have returned home if the family had had a little more money—a fraction of the cost of an adoption. And some Christian charities did do family-preservation work. But, with so much money at stake, children in orphanages were being adopted abroad without their parents' knowledge, or parents were told that the child was going to America to get an education and would soon return home. Orphanages were paid part of the fees, so they had good reason to find more and more adoptable children. Some children were kidnapped from their families, sometimes by traffickers who viewed themselves as missionaries. Sometimes a well-intentioned American couple would adopt a child only to discover, much later, that the child had a family that wanted it back.

When trafficking allegations grew too loud to ignore, some countries shut down their international-adoption programs altogether. Ethiopia and Guatemala had done so—Guatemala (which had been sending one out of every hundred of its children to America) in 2008, Ethiopia in 2018. As news of corruption in the orphan business spread in evangelical circles, and as more countries closed their adoption programs, the rates of international adoption rapidly declined. In 2021, Bethany Christian Services, one of the largest adoption agencies in the U.S., closed its international-adoption program after nearly forty years.

But evangelical groups were active in domestic adoptions, too, promoting to American women the idea that giving up a baby was a heroic act of love. Deanna believed that, except in cases of abuse or neglect, it was wrong to adopt a child unless that child had no family at all that could take it in. She tried to persuade people she knew that the thing to do was not adopt babies but give mothers what they needed to keep them. "People will say, in social-media posts, If you're pregnant and can't take care of your baby, I'll adopt them," she said. "I want to see people making ads that say, If you're pregnant and can't take care of your baby, I'm opening my checkbook, I will take you in, I will foot the bill for whatever you need." She had done that herself, taking in a child for a year while the child's mother, a relative, was in rehab. But she hadn't had much success persuading anyone else.

When Joy came back from her time in Korea in the summer of 1994, she was angry—angry at the Korean government for giving so many children away, and angry at the ignorance of the Americans who had told her that she had been rescued, that Korea was poor and backward, that Korean men were abusive. A couple of years later, she joined Also-Known-As, or A.K.A.—a new organization based in New York that had been started by a friend of hers, Hollee McGinnis, to create a community of international adoptees. She began spending time with six or seven women in the group, all Korean adoptees around her age.

Something was happening among adoptees. In 1996, at the same time that A.K.A. was coming together, Marley Greiner, an adoptee and a reporter at the Columbus *Free Press*, started posting on a Usenet newsgroup, alt.adoption, and signed her posts "Bastard Nation." Later that year, Greiner helped to form a group of the same name, in the spirit of Queer Nation and ACT UP. She envisioned Yippie-style actions—mass burning of amended birth certificates, "practical jokes" on social workers. "For those of you dear readers who may think that I had a terrible adoption experience, I did not," Greiner wrote on the Bastard Nation Web site. "But



the closed adoption system is a system of lies which would not be tolerated in any other forum."

In the late nineties, Susan Cox, a Korean adoptee, came up with the idea of convening adult Korean adoptees for the first time. The Gathering, as it was called, was held in Washington, D.C., in 1999. It was decided to survey the participants, and Joy, who was then working for the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, a think tank, co-wrote a paper discussing the results. It turned out that many adoptees had been abused by their adoptive parents. More than a third of the respondents said that when they were growing up they viewed themselves as Caucasian.

Joy got a master's in social work and took a job with an adoption agency. She wanted to understand how adoption worked, particularly home studies, through which agencies interviewed couples and matched them with children. She talked to couples who spoke about their years-long struggles with infertility, and realized how traumatized many of them were. She was required, as part of the home study, to ask about this. Had they mourned the biological child that they would not have? Had they reconciled themselves to that loss, enough to make room for this new child, who would be very different?

She pictured the adopted child grown up, asking the parents, How is it that everyone in this community is white, and everyone who comes to our dinner table is white? Even if she believed that the family was not going to honor the culture of the child, there was nothing much she could do about it—to be counselled out of adoption, parents had to have something serious on their record. But she felt she was playing God with the lives of children. She began to sleep badly at night, and when she did sleep she had nightmares about children asking her, What were you thinking, putting me in that house?

After a year and a half, she could no longer bear doing placements, and she moved to the agency's post-adoption division. She paid home visits to see what the new adoptees needed, from medicine to translators. She loved that work. She felt that she was there in the trenches with the child and the parents as they faced each other for the first time, with all their fears and limitations and misunderstandings and difficult histories and longing and love.

Joy had met her future husband in college, though they didn't start dating until later. He was Korean also, but not an adoptee. It was unusual for a Korean adoptee to date a Korean. Adoptees were greeted with suspicion by Korean families. Joy had dated other Korean American men, but all of them broke up with her after their mothers found

out she was adopted. Not only was she not a real Korean girl, but how could they know she was a good Korean girl when they couldn't meet her parents? Joy felt that she and her husband were an interracial couple.

When she got pregnant, in her mid-thirties, she prepared diligently to become a mother. She went into therapy and read a lot of books. When she gave birth to her son, she was afraid. Is he mine? she wondered. Will he love me? She had to leave him in the hospital overnight because he had jaundice. That night she sobbed, thinking, Will they take him away from me? Will I be allowed to bring him home?

Several months after Deborah told Angela that she was not her mother, Bryan suggested that they try to find someone else in Deborah's family. She heard back from an aunt, Belinda, right away:

> DEBORAH DENIED IT???? GOD HELP US ALL, HERE IS MY NUMBER, CALL ME IF YOU WANT. . . . I'M BLOWN AWAY, SO SORRY, DON'T KNOW WHY, WE ARE A CLOSE KNIT FAMILY

Belinda put her in touch with her siblings Timothy, James, and Carolyn, whom everyone called Nay-Nay. Angela had imagined her siblings growing up with Deborah, knowing deeply who they were. But when she spoke with Nay-Nay it turned out that they had not been fully raised by Deborah, either. The boys had lived mostly with their grandmother; Nay-Nay had lived with her grandmother until she was nine, then she had lived sometimes with Deborah and sometimes at a friend's place. Sometimes she didn't see Deborah at all, didn't even know where she was.

About a year after her trip to Chattanooga, Angela heard that Deborah was ready to talk, so she called her. This time, Deborah acknowledged her right away. "Off the board, I need to apologize to you," she said. "When I first met you, that was not to send you away—I should have gotten in touch with you myself, to let you know that I needed us to meet one-on-one, without all that rhetoric out there." When Sandy had turned up at her door after twenty-five years, with his brother and Angela and a bunch of white people, she was caught off guard. Whatever was going on, it was not the kind of thing she liked to discuss in front of half a dozen strangers in the middle of the street.

"There's a lot I've done that I can't explain to you," she said. "I'm angry with myself. . . . My mother did not raise me like that." She was angry with herself mostly for not taking care of herself while she was pregnant. When Angela was born, a doctor had told her that the baby was sick, and she was led to believe that if she kept her she would probably die. Deborah said to the agency, I'll sign this paper on one condition: don't show me that baby, because if you do I'm not signing anything. "The hurt that I feel," Deborah told Angela, "it will always be there. And I'll take that to my grave."

Deborah remembered telling Sandy, when she found out she was pregnant, that the baby was his. She was friendly with his family—she had known his sister since high school. But Sandy had been told by a doctor that he could never have children, so he didn't believe her. One of his brothers was a professional boxer making money, and she figured he thought she was just after some of it, so she disappeared. For a while she lived on the street, sleeping in a different place each night; then she found an apartment in a housing project. She knew her family would judge her harshly for giving the baby up, so she kept her pregnancy a secret from them.

She had already had four children. Deborah had kept her first three because she was doing O.K. then. She had a job in the kitchen of a nursing home, and her mother was around to help her. Her mother was pretty much raising the children. Deborah told them to call their grandmother Mother and to call her Deborah. She felt she didn't deserve the title "mother"—she was just the birth mother. When she had a fourth child, a girl, the year before Angela, she knew she could not take care of her and gave her up for adoption.

After she gave birth to Angela, Deborah left the hospital on her own. She went back to her apartment and didn't leave for a long time. Even though she believed she'd done the right thing for the baby, she became so depressed that she didn't care what happened. She felt she had been ripped bone from bone. After a year or so, she returned to the adoption agency to ask if the baby was still there. When a caseworker told her she'd been adopted, Deborah went back home and drank Coca-Cola all day, until a doctor told her she had diabetes and if she kept drinking Coke it could kill her. She bought a baby doll, and then another, and another. She and the baby dolls watched television together.

Even a decade after that first phone call, Angela felt that she and Deborah did not have the relationship she had imagined. When she visited Deborah, she liked to have her mom or Bryan there with her. Angela felt Deborah had never really claimed her as her child. Deborah always said that she wasn't her mother, Teresa was. Angela had almost come to accept that she had had to be adopted.

When she had first met her aunt Belinda, Belinda had told her that Deborah didn't have a motherly instinct. When Deborah heard this she was so angry that Belinda would say something so hateful and untrue that she avoided her for years. But Angela didn't know this, and the idea that Deborah had never wanted to be a mother lodged deep in Angela's brain. When she was in her mid-twenties, shortly after she first spent time with Deborah, she went to a doctor to get her tubes tied. The doctor told her she was too young and wouldn't do it, but ten years later she was still determined not to have kids.

Angela had not connected the two things at the time she went to the doctor, but now she could see it. Deborah was so different from her—they didn't even resemble each other physically, as she and Sandy did. But not wanting to be a mother, she thought, might be something—something profound—that she and Deborah had in common. "Probably it has a lot to do with learning who Deborah is," she said. "Wanting to be closer to her. Wanting to feel like I'm really her kin."

For twenty years, Deanna didn't press her birth mother on the subject of her birth father for fear of upsetting her. But time was running out—if she didn't find him soon, it was increasingly unlikely that she would find him alive. In 2013, she wrote her birth mother a letter to ask her one last time to tell her



Angela holds a photograph of her birth mother, Deborah Johnson, and her adoptive mother, Teresa Burt.

her father's name. Her birth mother called and said that she would take his name to her grave, and, since the only two people who also knew it were dead, Deanna would never find him. Deanna told her gently that she could try to find him through DNA.

The idea that there could be other ways to search had clearly not occurred to her birth mother. On the other end of the phone, her tone changed right away. She said that she had faked her emotions during their reunion and for years after. She said that if Deanna tried to find her father she would never speak to her again. Deanna felt as if she'd been shot. While she was still on the phone, she logged on to a private Facebook page for Lost Daughters, a group of adoptee women who blogged about adoption in public and supported each other in private. She typed, Is anybody there? Is anybody there? Several of them were online, and wrote back to tell her she wasn't alone.

On the phone, her birth mother told her that the adoptee community she was part of was a sickness that had infected her with the belief that she had to know who her father was. She should just let it go. What nobody but adoptees seemed to understand was that not knowing who her father was wasn't a matter of curiosity—it felt to Deanna like life or death. It was like the not-knowing of a person whose child had gone missing.

All her mother had told her was that her father was Greek. She started a private Facebook group, Finding Mr. Greek, and enlisted a group of "search angels"—adoptees or birth mothers or other people who liked to assist in searches, who knew about DNA testing or genealogy. They posted on Facebook trying to find members of her birth mother's high-school class. They called people in the Greek church in Richmond. Deanna also prayed to God to put the name of her father into her head. At one point, she prayed for many hours over three days. At last she sensed God saying to her, Your father's name is Gus. Deanna immediately got in touch with the people who were helping her and told them of this new development, acknowledging that some of them might think she was crazy. They decided to look for all the Guses in Richmond who were within ten years of her mother's age. She found out that, in Greek American communities, Gus could be a nickname for Constantine, Kostas, or Konstantinos, so they made lists of all the men of the right age in Richmond with those names. There were dozens of them, but if they were alive Deanna called them. If they were dead, she called relatives. She asked many people to take a DNA test for her, and many did. But at the end of all the calls and the DNA tests none of the Guses was a match.

For almost nine years, she got no closer. Anytime someone popped up on one of the DNA Web sites as a distant match, friends would stay up late looking up genealogical records and family trees, but they never found anyone close enough to identify him. At one point, Deanna started saying to her group of searchers, He must be dead by now—we are looking for a grave. But she kept looking because, even if he was dead, there might be a sister or a brother or a cousin who could tell her what kind of man he'd been.

Then, in May, 2022, one of her searchers called her at work and told her that a Greek first-cousin DNA match had popped up on 23andMe, and she would know who her father was in a matter of hours. The searchers started building

out the cousin's family tree, hoping that his mother didn't have several brothers. She didn't—she had one brother. He was sixteen years older than Deanna's birth mother. His name was Gus.

Gus was ninety-one and in a nursing home. A few months earlier, adult protective services had found him alone in his home in Richmond in terrible condition; they forced him into a nursing home, because he couldn't take care of himself and had no one to help. Deanna arranged to meet him over FaceTime. She asked him if he remembered meeting her birth mother in 1965, and told him she was the child of that relationship. He believed her right away and started to cry.

She drove to Richmond and spent a week with him. He had been a professional ballroom dancer, he told her. He was a bon vivant, always flirting with women, but he had never married. He told her, I don't want to die alone in here. So she made up a room for him in her house with a hospital bed. She and Larry were living in a suburban development in Wesley Chapel, Florida, just outside Tampa. She decorated the room for Gus with mementos from his house in Richmond—a pair of two-tone wing tips, his dancing trophies, a portrait of him in his younger days—and brought him home.

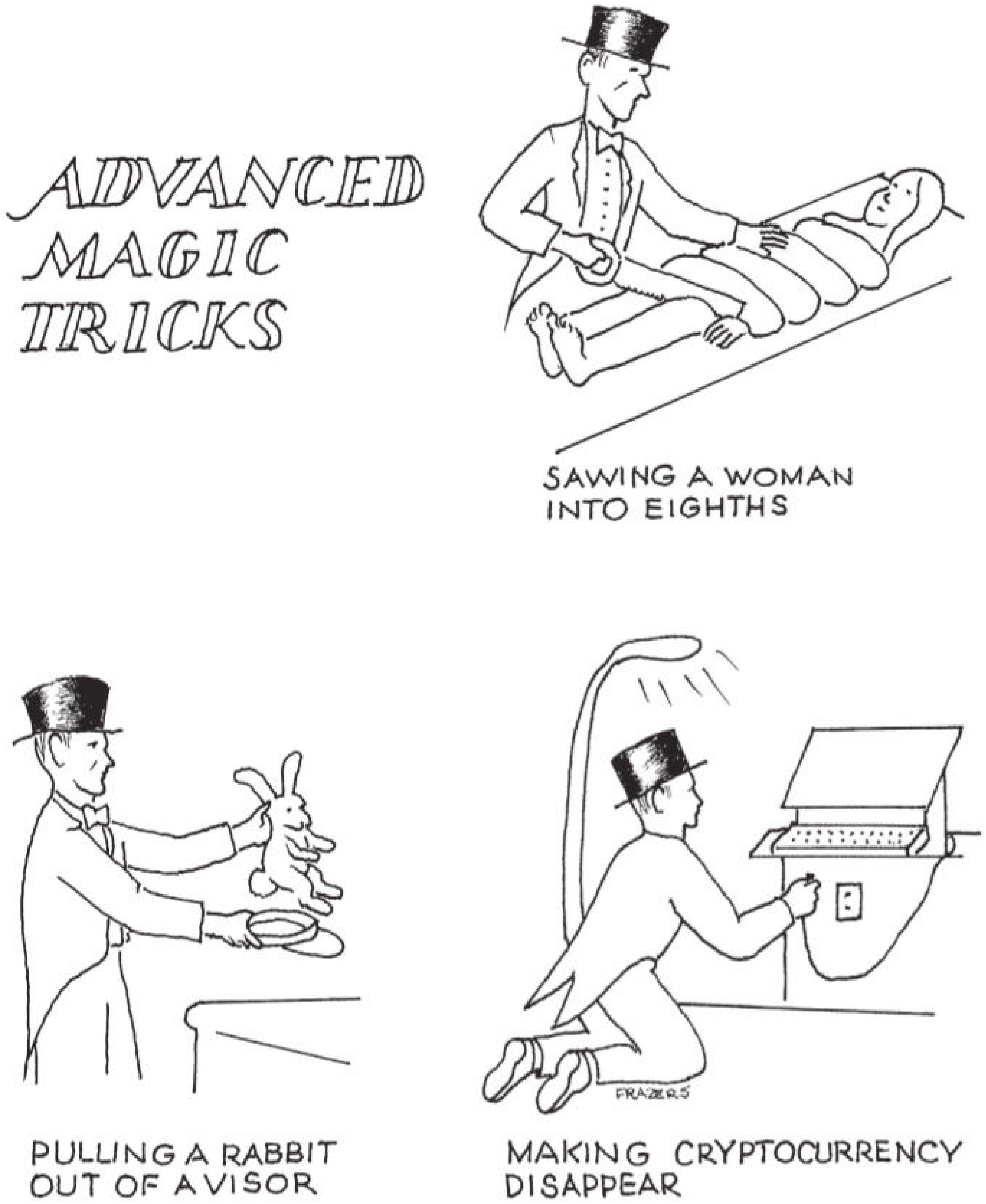
He'd had no idea that she had been adopted. In his Greek community, adoption was rare—there was always someone in the family who would raise a child—and he was furious that she had been raised by strangers. At first, not wanting to upset him, Deanna said nothing. But then, one day, when he was roaring about how outrageous it was that her mother had given her up, Deanna said, Gus, what did you expect? She was kicked out of her parents' house, she had nowhere to go, and you lied to her, you never helped her. He didn't bring the subject up again. They had seven months together before he died.

By her mid-thirties, Angela had made a life of talking about adoption in every possible medium. She had a podcast, "The Adoptee Next Door." She had a Web series, "The Adopted Life," in which she interviewed transracial adoptees. She posted on Instagram as "angieadoptee." She had written a book, "You Should Be Grateful," blending her own adoption experience with those of others. She and Bryan had made several short films about adoption, in addition to a full-length documentary he had made about her reunion with her birth parents, called "Closure."

They lived in a two-story house in the south end of Seattle, in a quiet housing development around a small park where people walked their dogs. From home, she hosted bimonthly meetings of adult adoptees, and mentored kids one-on-one. Some of the kids she had met in recent years had truly open adoptions. One boy referred to his birth mother, who was in prison, as Mother, and to his two adoptive mothers as Momma and Mom. Kids would talk casually about staying with their birth mother for the weekend, or their birth mother coming to watch their baseball games. To older adoptees, too anxious about hurting their adoptive parents to tell them that they read blogs about adoption, much less to search for their birth parents, this was astonishing.

More recently, Angela had developed "Cultivating an Anti-Racist Support Network" workshops for parents who had adopted, or were thinking of adopting, kids of color. It was through one of these workshops that she had met Ali and Drew Fleming, who lived in New York. Ali and Drew knew they couldn't have a baby the ordinary way, and they had thought that adoption was the ethical alternative. Since Drew and his family were white but Ali's family was from India, they had signed up for Angela's workshop to prepare the ground for their interracial family.

They had first thought of adopting from India, but then they realized that that would make it nearly impossible for the child to know its birth parents, and they had heard about corruption



problems in international adoption, so they started looking domestically. They hired an adoption attorney, who recommended that they not go through an agency, because an agency could demand tens of thousands of dollars up front which they wouldn't get back, even if they never got a child. Ali also discovered that, if a woman agreed to give them her baby when it was born, the agency would ask for still more money, which they would not get back either, even if the woman changed her mind. That was bad not only because they might spend tens of thousands of dollars for no baby, but also because it was so much money that it could give the woman the impression that the couple had already bought her baby, and feel pressured to relinquish. No, the attorney said, they should try to find a mother on their own.

There were ways to do this. They sent letters to churches and pregnancy crisis centers and ob-gyn offices, but Ali and Drew were pro-choice and this felt predatory to them. They created a Web site advertising themselves as potential parents—he was a doctor, she was a math teacher, they had two dogs, surely all that would look good. They hired adoption consultants who taught them how to run ads on Facebook and Instagram that targeted women who were looking for parents. Ali was advised to spell her name Allie so it didn't sound Middle Eastern. They were advised not to post any photos of Indian holidays on their Web site, but that there should be a Christmas tree.

They were contacted by about thirty women. Some were scams, but in most cases, as far as she could tell, the women were really pregnant. Most already had kids. Ali spent hours texting with the women and talking to them on video calls. Many of them were conflicted about giving up their baby. In many cases what was preventing them from keeping it was a relatively small amount of money—a couple of thousand dollars. She kept talking women out of placing their baby, though she realized that this was counterproductive. The more women she talked to, the less she could imagine a situation where it would be better for both mother and baby if the baby came to her.

By this time, she and Drew were starting to feel nauseated and sullied by the adoption business. Reading around online, Ali had discovered that there was a "second chance" re-homing adoption market, for children whom parents had adopted but didn't want anymore, or couldn't keep. These tended to be older children, often from other countries. Their situation was so bleak, Ali could barely think about it. They contacted their attorney and asked about surrogacy.



When Ali DM'd Angela on Instagram to say that they had decided not to adopt after all, Angela was glad. In her conversations with prospective parents, she tried to make them see how fraught transracial adoption was. She told parents that getting a Black doll for your child, taking them to an Ethiopian restaurant, sending them to transracial-adoptee summer camp, was not enough. All that just produced a sense that you were performing Blackness, Angela would say. What Black children needed was actual Black people in their lives. Most people who found their way to her were going to agree with that, but making it happen was another matter. She said, "I hear almost every day in my consults with white parents, We know we should have Black and brown kids in our kids' lives, but, like, how do we find them, and what do we say when we see one?"

Some years before, Angela had given a talk at a conference and told the story of her adoption by white parents, and afterward an older Black woman came up to her. You are my worst fear realized, the woman said. You aren't a true Black person. I'm sorry the system erased you from our culture. Angela was stricken. The woman had introduced herself as a member of the National Association of Black Social Workers, which in 1972 had issued a manifesto condemning transracial adoption. "Only a Black family," it stated, "can transmit the emotional and sensitive subtleties of perception and reaction essential for a Black child's survival in a racist society."

Angela no longer believed that there was such a thing as a true Black person—she felt more confident in her Blackness. And, whereas when she was younger she had believed that transracial adoptees were less truly Black than people raised in Black families, she now felt that the experience of growing up Black in a white home spoke to the core of what it meant to be Black in America.

On the other hand, she had begun to wonder whether the National Association of Black Social Workers might have been partly right—that transracial adoption should happen only as a last resort. She loved her adoptive parents, and was grateful to them for supporting her wholeheartedly in her search for her birth parents, and even in her questioning of transracial adoption. But she also wished she wasn't adopted. It was so difficult to explain that to most people.

She found that people tended to understand the problems of transracial adoption more readily in the context of Native Americans. She was closely watching a Supreme Court case, Haaland v. Brackeen, which had been argued before the Court in November, 2022. The Brackeens were a white couple who had adopted a Navajo boy and wanted to adopt his half sister, too. They had filed suit to challenge the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act, which made it difficult for outsiders to adopt a Native American child. They argued that the law was unconstitutional, because it discriminated on the basis of race. The Indian Child Welfare Act was a response to the removal of as many as a third of Native American children from their families, to be placed in deracinating boarding schools (a guiding motto was "Kill the Indian, save the man") and, later, in the mid-twentieth century, in adoptive homes. Angela knew that Native Americans were a special case, but she thought it was possible that Haaland v. Brackeen would lead people to think differently about transracial adoption in general.

She had started to push against it in her work, but it was going to be difficult. In the early nineteen-seventies, at the time of the National Association of Black Social Workers manifesto, transracial adoption was rare—adoptions of Black children by white parents made



Joy Lieberthal Rho's birth mother searched for her for twenty-one years.

up about one per cent of all adoptions. Now it was widespread—more than half of Black adoptees were adopted by non-Black families. "I was consulting with this white woman who wants to adopt, and she was, like, I don't think I'm the best person to adopt a Black kid," she said. "And I was, like, Great, tell your agency. This is the struggle, nothing will change until you stick by your principles. But white people are not going to do that, because white guilt starts to come out."

For decades, agencies had been constrained by the 1994 Multiethnic Placement Act, which restricted how agencies could consider race in placements, but now some were pushing back. Bethany Christian Services had issued a statement that the act should be overhauled and race should be considered in adoption. Angela had consulted for one agency in Indiana which asked white people seeking to adopt children of color whether they lived in a racially diverse town, had identified a school in that town with both teachers of color and white teachers, and had found a multiracial church.

All of this seemed good to Angela; but what would happen to a Black child if an agency couldn't find it a Black family, as had happened with her? There were twenty-five thousand Black kids in foster care whose parents' rights had been terminated—what about them? Now that Angela had met her Black relatives, she saw that her birth father's family could have raised her—agencies didn't try nearly hard enough to find fathers. But her situation, having been given up for adoption, was unusual: the rate of never-married Black women voluntarily relinquishing babies had been close to zero for decades. Many of the Black kids in foster care were there not because their parents had given them up but because they had been taken from parents who very much wanted them, by child-protective services. And most of those children had been removed not because of abuse but due to "neglect," which could mean a lot of things—unsafe housing, not enough food, leaving kids home alone, missing doctors' appointments—that were often consequences of poverty. So was adoption a way for those kids to have permanent families? Or was it the escape valve that allowed the child-protection system to continue removing children from their parents without fully reckoning with the cost? It was both.

Joy now has a private therapy practice in Scarsdale, New York, consisting of adoptees and adoptive parents. About fifteen years ago, she took on a second job, as a counsellor at Juilliard. In her private practice, she sees patients in a quiet, dark room in the basement of a church.

Adoptees are overrepresented in therapy. Some worry that they might be unknowingly attracted to a relative and commit incest. Some are jealous of their own children—jealous of their own love. Some adoptees of color have had the experience, even years after growing up in a white family, of catching sight of themselves in a mirror or a shop window and thinking, Who's that? Many adoptees have a persistent sense that they don't exist, or aren't real, or aren't human—that they weren't born from a woman but came from nowhere, or from space. Some picture themselves being birthed by a building—the hospital that was recorded on their paperwork.

"There were some international adoptees who said, My life began at J.F.K.," Joy said. "Even if you know cognitively that's not true, no one can prove to you that it's not true. If, for the time before you landed in J.F.K., if the paperwork is inaccurate, if the story is falsified, if there are no witnesses, if there's no documentation, there are no photographs, nothing—that can really fuck people up." Some adoptees felt that way even when there was no missing time.

"I remember working with a domestic adoptee whose parents were in the delivery room at the time of their birth, and they were literally handed over by the birth mother," she said. "I met them when they were a teen-ager. They actually had by that time reunited with their birth mother, and all they talked about was, I have no idea who I am, I feel like I'm walking around with a mask on my face."

She didn't know why this was so, but that patient was far from the only one. "There's one theory that if the birth mother knew she was going to relinquish, is there an intrauterine hormonal shift that begins to—were there different kinds of hormones that flowed in the amniotic fluid? Maybe." It was known that cortisol levels in the amniotic fluid rose if the mother was experiencing prolonged stress. "Should the handoff have been so easy? Should the mother have nursed the baby? At what point did the baby feel, Wait a minute, this isn't right, I'm missing something? Could it be that the adoptive parents had intense years of infertility, and was the adoptive mom depressed and maybe not really attaching to the baby, even though she desperately wanted it? There are so many factors we don't know."

Perhaps because she had lived with her mother for the first three years of her life, she did not have that feeling that she didn't exist, but she felt something similar. "Loneliness feels more accurate to describe my experience," she said. "One minute I'm here, the next minute I'm there—these leaps of time and space and cultures, there's nothing that connects it. There are swaths of time that don't exist in my consciousness, and don't exist in anyone's consciousness. My birth mother only knows me from zero to three. There is no person that can account for my entire existence."

Over the years, Joy had tried to build a relationship with her birth mother, but it wasn't easy. They sometimes texted each other on a group chat with her brother, but the texts felt formal and generic—good wishes and emojis. Joy felt that she was still basically a stranger.

In 2008, her birth mother and brother came to stay with her and her husband and two kids in their small apartment. She thought they would come for maybe four weeks, but they stayed for three months. She had heard from other adoptees that their birth mothers were nosy and couldn't stop touching them, but her mother was the opposite. She was quiet and passive. She didn't seem curious about anything. Even though by that point Joy's Korean was very good, Joy found she couldn't talk to her. She still barely looked at her. All that had been O.K. when Joy paid her short visits in Korea, but when they were crowded in together for that long in her own space it made her furious. One day, she blew up. She said, You have been living in my house for six weeks and you haven't asked me a single question. You don't want to know anything about me. Her mother started to cry. She said, You are out of my life. I just wanted to know where you were.

When her mother left to go back to Korea, Joy was glad to see her go. She didn't really feel like staying in touch, but she figured she would do so for her kids' sake. In the years after the visit, she reconciled herself to their relationship being what it was. Now all she wanted was to sit with her mother one more time without asking for anything. "I don't need any more clarity on the past," she said. "I'm perfectly fine with going out to dinner. I can't— The ship has passed of trying to get her to understand me."

Although she felt no closer to her birth mother, Joy did feel more Korean. There were a lot of Koreans in her neighborhood, and her spoken Korean was good enough now that she could chat with mothers on the playground and they never knew she was not as Korean as they were. They would ask her if she celebrated Thanksgiving, and were surprised that she knew about pumpkin pie. When she walked down the street with her husband now, she thought, We are a full Korean couple. It was weird. She had always felt more like an adoptee than anything else.

As she grew older, and fewer and fewer children were adopted from Korea, she realized that at some point the small culture she was part of would die out. "It's just a matter of time," she said. "In the long history of humanity, we will exist only in a span of sixty or seventy years." She felt that she had to keep talking about that experience or it would all be lost. She had been interviewed on video as part of KoreanAmericanStory.org's Legacy Project, and for the Side by Side project, both extensive film archives of Korean adoptees telling the stories of their lives. She had created an online adoptee community, IAMAdoptee.org.

She had heard that several hundred Korean adoptees, led by a Korean Danish lawyer, were demanding that the Korean government investigate how they had come to be adopted—if government orphanages had lied about whether they had families, or falsified their paperwork, making them harder to find. But she knew that most of her fellows weren't interested in the history of Korean adoptions the way she was. None of her three sisters had tried to find their birth parents, or had even been to Korea. This was normal. Even the largest Korean adoptee group on Facebook had only about seven thousand members, and if you added others you got maybe twice that. But about two hundred thousand Korean children had been adopted overseas. Where was everybody else?

Soon, all that would remain of those couple of hundred thousand Korean children would be some documents that would end up in libraries, dissertations, and family albums. "How many adoptees in my generation were plastered on the Living section of their local newspaper?" she said. "Probably thousands of us. We were the sensation of the town. We all have a newspaper clipping of the arrival of the children from Korea. And in it the parents are happy and the babies all look traumatized. I look at my arrival pictures now, and I'm just, like, that poor kid—no one explained to her what the hell's going on."

When she thought now about that bewildered child at the airport in 1976 in her peacock dress, her nose all bloody, she found that she thought about her in the third person. "I don't really think about this as me anymore," she said. "I don't know. Honestly, I don't think I can think about it in the first person, because I think that would. . . ." She paused. "She's had to stay in the past," she said. "I don't know that I could bring her here." ♦


WEDDING PLANNING WAS AN EXTENDED EXERCISE IN ACCEPTING WHAT WE COULD NOT CONTROL.
I've put down the nine-thousand-dollar deposit on the folding chairs.
The dress is finally on a flash sale for only half a month's salary!
HUNDREDS OF CHOICES HAD TO BE MADE, EACH ONE SEEMINGLY MORE CONTRIVED THAN THE LAST.
132 133 134 135 136 137 138 139 140 142
I just... I just want wine.
WHEN MY PARENTS SAT US DOWN TO EXPLAIN THE MINUTIAE OF AN ELABORATE "BETROTHAL CEREMONY," WE WERE SO OVERCOME WITH DECISION FATIGUE THAT WE ACCEPTED THE TASKS WITHOUT QUESTION...
In the morning, he will deliver one roast pig, two pounds of dried oysters, six cans of abalone, one hundred and sixty-eight melon cakes, two bottles of whiskey, and two red envelopes, and then...
Sounds great!
... UNTIL A LITTLE LATER.
Why one hundred and sixty-eight cakes specifically?
1-6-8 is "yat lo fat" in Cantonese, which sounds like "prosperous all the way"!
So they're, like, good-luck puns?
How about the roast pig?
The roast pig means purity!
I don't know about that.
And the oysters?
Dried oysters are "ho si"—that's "good thing"!
Ah, I Googled it!
Anyway, there's always a pig.
O.K.

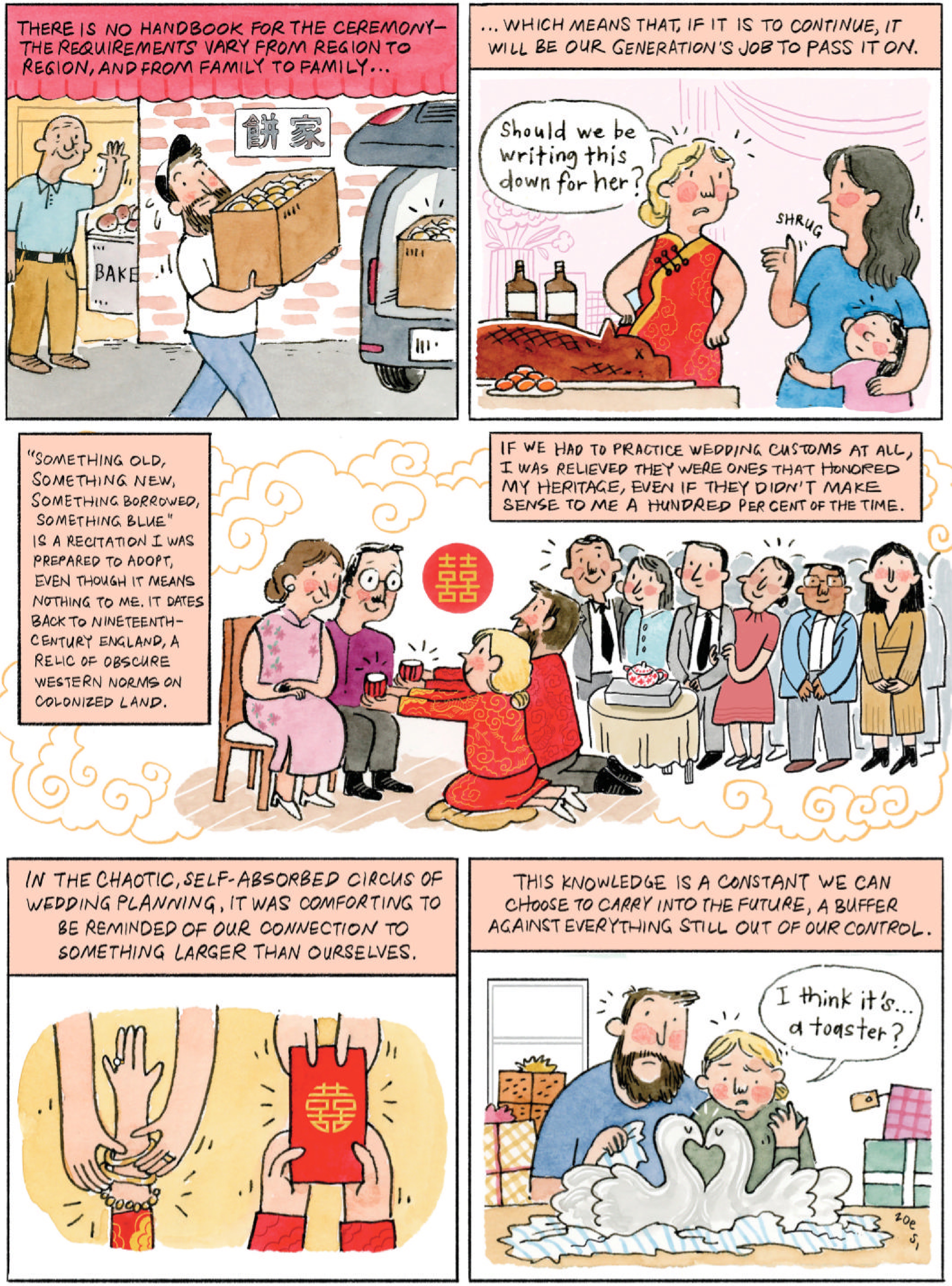

THERE IS NO HANDBOOK FOR THE CEREMONY— THE REQUIREMENTS VARY FROM REGION TO REGION, AND FROM FAMILY TO FAMILY...
餅家
BAKE
... WHICH MEANS THAT, IF IT IS TO CONTINUE, IT WILL BE OUR GENERATION'S JOB TO PASS IT ON.
Should we be writing this down for her?
SHRUG
"SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING BLUE" IS A RECITATION I WAS PREPARED TO ADOPT, EVEN THOUGH IT MEANS NOTHING TO ME. IT DATES BACK TO NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND, A RELIC OF OBSCURE WESTERN NORMS ON COLONIZED LAND.
囍
IF WE HAD TO PRACTICE WEDDING CUSTOMS AT ALL, I WAS RELIEVED THEY WERE ONES THAT HONORED MY HERITAGE, EVEN IF THEY DIDN'T MAKE SENSE TO ME A HUNDRED PER CENT OF THE TIME.
IN THE CHAOTIC, SELF-ABSORBED CIRCUS OF WEDDING PLANNING, IT WAS COMFORTING TO BE REMINDED OF OUR CONNECTION TO SOMETHING LARGER THAN OURSELVES.
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THIS KNOWLEDGE IS A CONSTANT WE CAN CHOOSE TO CARRY INTO THE FUTURE, A BUFFER AGAINST EVERYTHING STILL OUT OF OUR CONTROL.
I think it's... a toaster?



 ILLUSTRATION BY JUN CEN

Hey I understand you're angry, the first message said. A man's voice, probably a man my age. I would be angry, too. I know I messed up. I know it's not the first time I messed up. I have been dealing with a lot. I know you're dealing with a lot, too, it's not an excuse, but I just want to tell you how I see it, and how I can make it right. And most of all I want to listen. To what you want to say and to what you need from me. To make it right. We've come too far. I'm sorry, call me back, O.K.?

The number, which was not in my contacts, had appeared while I was walking Ava to the school bus. I'd never recorded a voice-mail greeting and I guess the person he meant to call hadn't either. The area code was the same as ours. We were stomping lanternflies to death every few yards, the bright red of their hind wings vivid against the pavement's gray. After I left Ava, I listened to the message—I'd put my earbuds in—several times as I walked to the train. On the corner of Church and McDonald, before I descended to the F, I encountered a cracked but intact full-length mirror somebody had set beside the curb, first taping a piece of paper to the glass that read: "Still works." Underground, when I refilled my MetroCard, the machine asked me if I wanted to add value or add time. It was too much, too beautiful: the bright red, the curbed cracked mirror, the deepest question in the world.

I listened again as I took the F toward Manhattan, inferring a body from the voice. A white man in his forties, though I couldn't specify what aspects of the voice led me to these conclusions about race and age. I was powerless not to infer them. Tall, strong—why did I think that? Something about depth and resonance. A little hungover. His voice a mix of desperation and the remnants of sleep, as if he were still sifting what he did from what he dreamed. Traces, but only traces, of a New York accent, from which I formed my assumptions about class. I looked around at the people on my train and tested the voice against their bodies. There was a broad-shouldered white man—bluejeans, hooded sweater, brown leather jacket—with his black hair slicked back. He was leaning against a pole, reading a newspaper and holding a cup of bodega coffee. I played the message again while staring at the man, trying to attach the voice to him.

We pulled into Carroll Street. Ava's bus would be arriving at her school, just a couple of blocks away. I'd put her on the bus, gone underground, caught up with her. I imagined that she was walking on the gray pavement scattered with lanternfly corpses directly above me. I think you can sense it, if you walk over your father. I believe we have thousands of senses, that we are shedding and gaining senses all the time.

Dada, she would say, having materialized at the foot of the bed, street light through the blinds catching the sequinned cat shape on her pajama top, I have a question. Most nights she had a question. I had a draft e-mail where I wrote them down. I opened it now to add the one she'd asked last night:

Why is falling a thing
Do I still have zero siblings
How real are stars
Is a flower a good example

Yes. Go back to bed. I swiped away from the tender archive. When the Internet came back at the first stop in Manhattan, I Googled the lanternflies the radio had told us all to kill on sight and read: "The tree of heaven is a preferred host." When everything is poetry I know I am unwell. The advent of new senses is a sign.

And seeing signs is a sign, as in: I emerged from the train at Bryant Park and there, on the corner of Sixth Avenue, was a pile of broken silvered glass along the curb. The fragments still worked. What you need to do is resist seeing pattern where there is none, said a reasonable voice. But hearing voices is a sign, I joked to myself. You can't function when everything takes on meaning. The sense that everything that happens happens on cue, a sudden shower of ginkgo leaves. That a message has been left for you.

Hey I understand you're angry, he said, as I walked to the staff entrance on West Fortieth. A barely perceptible spring in my step produced by the carpet of yellow fan-shaped leaves. I would be angry, too. I know I messed up. I know it's not the first time I messed up. I have been dealing with a lot. I know you're dealing with a lot, too, how you can perceive the crimson hind wings through the semitranslucent forewings. It's not an excuse, but I just want to tell you how I see it.

At the time, my work at the library involved wearing white cotton gloves in a cool room with low light and low relative humidity where I received no signal and where I removed old photographs from brown folders and sorted them into green folders for digitization by subject, time period, process. These were first passes through some new donations, nothing of particular value, but full of punishing beauty, so I had to protect myself, even from the language: sensitized plates, silver salts. Is this a good example, every photograph asks, whether a cyanotype of algae or three men waiting for a bus in Yorkville, 1965. Yes, go back to sleep. I liked to think the gloves were protecting me from the oils the images gave off, that the oils could enter my pores and dreams, but I understood that to be poetic; it wasn't an actual paranoid belief.

So it wasn't until I surfaced for lunch, it wasn't until I was waiting to order at the salad place on Sixth Avenue, that I saw I had another message from the man. I also had a message from Camila and one from an unknown number, probably the dentist; I owed the practice money. I waited to listen to my messages until I had my food and had found a place to sit in Bryant Park, not far from the fountain near Forty-first, which was turned off. It was drizzling intermittently but I still didn't eat inside and I liked the feel of the fine drops on my unmasked face, mist basically. The message from Camila, who was still remote, was about Ava's new after-school schedule, You're on for Tuesday pickups, and after the logistics there was a pause of three seconds, I replayed it and counted the seconds, this time hearing distant sirens in the background, before she said: I hope work is good, that you're feeling good, see you this evening. In that three-beat silence was exhaustion, rage, concern. The second message was the practice calling about my balance.

Hey I know you are getting these,

the man said, angry, trying not to sound angry. I could hear sirens in his message, too, the same sirens? I'm sorry and I want to tell you that and also figure this out, because we can figure this out, and we owe it to each other to figure it out and not let something get bigger than it needs to be. I was definitely way out of line, no excuses, and I want to make it right, but you have to talk to me, O.K.? Seriously, call me back.

The drops stopped being fine and fell on cue. They darkened the pavement, the wall around the park, the inactive fountain, first making coin-size individual areas of comparative dark where they struck, then darkening large swaths of pavement at once, as if something were spreading from inside the concrete. You've seen this before, but I just want to tell you how I see it, replaying the message again and again, the surfaces of the city darkening, a beautiful experience we share, I don't want to make it bigger than it needs to be, but I really couldn't eat, I set my compostable bowl of superfoods on a nearby chair for another person or pigeons or rats or lanternflies, and inhaled the odor of rain and exhaust and weed, Manhattan always smelled like weed now, even when no smoker could be seen, but marijuana is no excuse.

I texted Camila that I was feeling fine (basically mist, I didn't say) and that I'd noted the new schedule and that I loved her and would see her later and then I dialled the man's number and cancelled the call so I could message him. I wrote: Hey you have the wrong number good luck reaching who you are trying to reach, I hope you work it out. Then it really started to pour—a group of kids on a day trip waiting to reboard their bus began to shriek with pleasure, a teacher yelling, "Find your partner, everybody partner up."

He'd had too much to drink and fought with her brother, no, cousin at a gathering for her birthday. I could vaguely see them in my head yelling at each other on Cortelyou, fucking try me. It had ruined her time. Or he'd bought her a horrendous gift for her birthday, why my focus on birthdays, two pairs of earrings from Macy's, neither close to her style, the doubling of the gift compounding the injury, worse than forgetting. Strange that while I could conjure only a vague image of the man and the presumed woman I could see the chandelier and teardrop earrings vividly, glittering against someone's palm. It looked like he'd left the tiny price tags on, but I couldn't make the numbers out. Or she'd discovered his long string of flirtatious texts with a co-worker, or that he'd been sleeping with his co-worker, a last straw. Or she'd discovered mysterious charges on the credit-card bill, traced them back to the online gambling, mainly sports betting, that he'd forsworn. I could almost see him grab her wrists, screaming: listen, listen, listen, which is something he'd done once before, the summer before the pandemic, when they were on a trip in South America. The anger and the alcohol, how they were under the remorse, influenced these projections, as did various indefensible inferences I made based on the timbre of his voice, but the earrings were so vivid, felt like signals I was picking up through the stereotypes, we have so many senses. I didn't think he'd hit her, but he'd thrown something in her direction, his phone or one of those big vape mods, which struck the mirror hard.

Remember how the night Ava was born, when they took her to the nursery, I stood there by the glass with a



few other manic parents, and all of the babies were swaddled in identical blankets, blue stripes, they all had identical caps, and the little skin you could see was purple or red, the color changeable, and you couldn't sort anyone by gender, race, process? We were looking through thick glass trying to attach an incredibly specific possessive love—*my* love for *my* child—to each of these bodies, but all of them and none of them were ours. And another dad said what I was thinking, that they all looked the same, and I said, only half joking: You know, they should just give you a baby at random, and then everybody, even the rich, would start investing in prenatal care, health care in general, housing, food security, etc. I was going on about this until a nurse who must have been behind us pushed me gently into one of those plastic upholstered chairs and handed me a tiny carton of orange juice—she'd opened it for me, she'd inserted a straw—and said, Drink this, take some deep breaths and drink this. It was punishingly sweet, how the one and the many get confused, these pronouns that can hail you out of the air.

And then there was hail when I came out of the basement for my break, white stones melting everywhere on the steps, the sidewalk. The sun was out so the storm must have been brief; it was dizzying to think how I almost missed these tiny ice moons sparkling in autumn light, how I would have missed all these calls if I'd gone to my desk to eat my Kind bar and check my e-mail. I got out my phone to take a picture of the hail—I'd send it to Camila and ask if it had fallen in Brooklyn, too—but it just didn't show up in the picture, it just looked like nothing, so I picked up a few hailstones to take a closeup in my hand. But when I held my phone over my palm the diminishing hail became those earrings, just for a second, much less than a second, and "became" isn't really the word, I didn't fully believe it, but I drew my hand back suddenly, as if from a stinging insect or a burn.

I don't know how it is for you, which ones you save, but at the time there were several I could neither listen to nor erase. One was from a dead friend and the message was mundane; I'd read the transcription my phone produced, could recite it for you, but the recording was like a little vial of her breath and I couldn't listen to it, couldn't expose myself, but I also couldn't delete it, return it to the air, although I'd marked it for deletion before, and then restored it before emptying the trash of other messages.

Then there were a couple from Ava when she was a toddler, when Camila

had held the phone for her and said, Say hi to Daddy, one that was more babbling than speech, she was really young, and the other full sentences but much higher than her current voice. Those messages had grown too beautiful to listen to or destroy, I'd waited too long. And then I'd saved one long voice mail from Camila that she hadn't meant to send.

She was, is, talking to a man in what sounds like high wind, although that's just the fabric of her pocket and distortion, but since it sounds like wind, I picture the exchange she inadvertently recorded as taking place on the ferry to Governors Island, where Camila was working at the time. She says my name early in the message, it's one of only a handful of unmistakable words in the three-minute recording. Nothing the man says is intelligible, although at moments his tone is clear, is clearly interrogative, the vibrations gentle, asking her careful questions in response to what she's saying about me, about us, amid this thunderous wind, the water glittering around them, as they lean on the rails, shoulder to shoulder.



"Well, if I go down there, who will keep an eye on things?"

I thought she was telling him what I'd done, or maybe he already knew and she is saying that what's complicated is this question of what my illness, if it is an illness, explains or excuses, and what repair might mean in that context, or what liberties she might be justified in taking, because she deserves to feel alive, too, doesn't she, don't you get to feel alive without having to have "an episode," I imagine her saying, and the man, I don't hold this against him, feels a distinct sexual thrill at her talking this way.

Except it might have been me: she might have pocket-dialled me while we were talking, maybe that's why she says my name. Strangely, this made it more difficult for me to imagine the muffled speech, because it had been so long since she'd talked to me at any length by that point, save about logistics, and maybe we were just talking about piano and gymnastics, drop-off and pickup, but it didn't sound that way, the tonalities and rhythms implied emotional depth and resonance, and so, in the version in which it's me, it's like an abstract performance of a lost intimacy, the recording preserves its shape.

But on the day that it had hailed the man called a third time while I was on the F heading back to Carroll Gardens to pick up Ava from after school. It took a few minutes for the message to appear. (I don't fully understand that delay, sometimes I'll get voice mails instantly when the signal returns, but it usually takes several minutes and sometimes it takes an hour, hours, as if the messages were having trouble finding me.) By the time I was alerted to the presence of his new voice mail—I was surprised to have another message from him, given my text—I was waiting outside what the school calls the "big yard."

I often listen to my messages at pickup so I can avoid making small talk with the other parents and caretakers before the kids come bounding out of the building. Usually I don't have new messages to listen to, so either I listen to trivial old ones, automated messages from the pharmacy, or the one Camila left on the ferry, or sometimes I just hold the phone to my ear and pretend to be listening, although when I do that I do hear messages—"hear" them the way I "hear" language when I read, the almost sound of reading, not an actual auditory hallucination.

I pressed the little triangle icon beside the new message, first swiping away the twenty-per-cent-battery warning—the intrusion of those warnings always irritates me—and held the phone to my ear and listened while I watched the cafeteria doors. And the doors burst open just as the man began to speak in my ear and all these beautiful children came running out, many holding coats in their arms, blue surgical masks dangling from many faces. When I am attending to a message, the visual world goes watery, a little transparent. And whatever I'm listening to starts to coördinate whatever movements I perceive, so that, while I listened to what the man was

saying, all of those children rushing forth, spreading out across the blacktop, were increasingly vague to me, a wave of pale colors, and the advance of that wave seemed somehow keyed to, controlled by, the voice in my ear, as if the children could advance only as his sentences advanced, as if stopping the message would have stopped the kids in their tracks. Red light, green light.

Listen to me, the man said, and I could hear, or could feel, the contraction of the muscles in his jaw. You listen very carefully to me, you piece of shit, you need to mind your own fucking business, "good luck," he misquoted me in a squeaky voice, "reaching your friend," I don't need your luck motherfucker, "I hope you work it out" (the same high pitch, but also very sarcastic, as if I'd written that to mock him), fuck you, man. (How did he know I was a man?) Ava was waving to me now, smiling as she ran, a large rolled-up piece of paper in one hand, but I could only vaguely see her in the golden light, could barely make myself return her smile, lift my free arm in greeting. I Googled this number, O.K., and I know where you live, remember that I know where to find you, "good luck," fuck that, fuck you. It's people like you, man, it is assholes like you, and Ava was hugging me, you better watch yourself. Then she stepped back to unroll the portrait of the three of us and the dog we didn't have.

LOSS

In a photo snapped before we met,
You're smiling with no thought of yet.

I wonder, could you not recall
The future in that beach ball?

You're holding it certainly just to the side,
While behind you comes the coming tide.

Umbrella, sky, and salty spume—
In your sandcastle, was there a room?

With a light carving out the night
Where things that hadn't happened might?

I mean, did you never think of me
When looking at a Christmas tree?

Or at a turkey on Thanksgiving—
Was there about it something missing?

Or was the world minus me complete?
Was it tidy and perfectly neat?

Or was there a cloud in the sky
You noticed missing and wondered why?

On grade-school trips to the zoo,
Was I never there with you?

I'd Googled phone numbers before when I wanted to make sure I wasn't missing important calls—from the passport office before our trip to Argentina, for example, or from one of the extensions at Ava's school, or from a doctor who didn't want to leave sensitive information in a voice mail, and so on. The "reverse number lookup" had always implied the number was spam, telemarketing. I'd never had occasion to Google my own number until then, in the wake of the man's message, on the train home with Ava. I was sitting with her backpack between my feet and she was spinning around on the pole in front of me, singing the chorus of "Anti-Hero."

The first hit was from a Web site called Truepeoplesearch. I clicked it and was startled to find my name—Camila was listed under a section called "possible relatives"—and there was a list of addresses associated with the number: our current address, our two previous addresses in Brooklyn, even the place we'd had in Urbana, when we were in school. You had to pay for a search of public records.

I tried to take a deep breath, which is hard in a KN95, and told myself that this wasn't surprising, that of course anybody can be located on the Internet, but somehow I'd never quite realized that anyone in possession of my phone number could also know my address, map it, see where we lived from above, or walk around it on Street View. Our other addresses had been in big buildings, maybe that made me feel more protected and anonymous, but now we were one of just three units, and it said which unit, so this man, whose voice in the last message was dripping with rage and violence, knew exactly where my daughter slept, where she woke me with her questions.

My hands and the back of my neck felt very cold, almost to the point of numbness; the fury in his voice, the believable threat of it, terrified me, made it hard to think, and Ava was saying Dada, Dada, Dada, over and over again while I was trying to make all this the right size, no bigger than it needed to be, and that exasperating ten-per-cent-battery-life message popped up while I was trying to Google the man's number, and I snapped at her: Just be quiet for one minute, Ava, just be quiet. She froze, went silent, and the kids and grownups around us were suddenly looking at me or trying not to, because,

Did you never glimpse a face
Reflected in a museum case?

Or speak aloud when all alone
The name of someone still unknown?

And when in youth it rained and you ran
Were you a lost and lonely man?

Or were you always calm and content,
Knowing what the known world meant?

Simply shaking the drops from your coat,
After crossing the sandcastle moat.

Were you warm then, sure inside
The house you built before the tide?

Or did you listen close and wonder
If that was me in the thunder?

Were you listening for a knock
In the ticking of the clock?

Did you never feel a pang
For a song you'd never sang?

Did you still not miss me yet,
The day before we finally met?

—*Iris Smyles*

while the words I'd spoken were unremarkable, the voice wasn't mine. I put my phone away and said I'm sorry, sweetheart, what did you want to tell me. Did you bring a snack, she asked, trying not to cry.

Since I'd forgotten a snack, since I felt guilty, and since I wanted to collect my thoughts before facing Camila, who would know by looking at me that something was wrong, we got out a few stops early, at Seventh Avenue. I let Ava get whatever she wanted at the bakery, even though we'd recently made a rule about no dessert stuff on weekdays; she had good points about our hypocrisy, how she was allowed muffins that were basically cake, so why couldn't she just have a cookie, so "just today" I let her get a cookie as big as her face and we walked the long avenue blocks to the park, where we found a bench. My phone was dead.

The sun was low and behind the giant sugar maples, and it was hard to sort which leaves looked orange and red from the quality of the light and which were in fact those colors, had changed with the season. I asked Ava, who was doing a "leaf study" in first grade, why they changed color. She told me that orange and red and yellow and the other colors of the autumn leaves were "really there all along," but you can't see them because the chlorophyll—she beat the syllables in her hand as she said them, as she did with all recently acquired words—hides all those other colors. But what does that mean, love, for a color to be there but be hidden, what is an invisible color? She shrugged, smiled, and said: It's a thing. You could hear this little *guh* at the end of "thing" when she said that, and she said it a lot, this extra puff of breath, like she was launching the word onto a current.

She wanted to go to the Vanderbilt playground. We walked across the meadow holding hands, and she played for a while on the webbed, star-shaped climbing structure while I tried to decide if I should tell Camila about the messages. Then dusk was falling around Ava atop the structure and we needed to get home. We weren't that far, but it would take ages for us to walk at Ava's pace, and I couldn't call a car. We headed uphill to the Fifteenth Street stop to get the F; it was delayed because of a signalling problem, and we waited forever underground, taking turns reading the latest issue of *Ladybug*, and I thought I did a good job imitating the affect of the characters, inhabiting my roles.

While I was finding the right key, the door swung open. Camila kneeled and pulled Ava toward her, enveloped her. Thank God, she said, thank God. Had the man come to the house, had he threatened her? Before I could ask what was wrong, what had happened, Camila demanded, voice trembling, Where have you been?

I heard myself say the park, the playground, the train, the battery, but my language floated away. Camila led Ava by the hand to her room. I dropped Ava's schoolbag and took off my boots and walked to the kitchen. Without turning on the light, I disposed of our masks and filled a glass of water from the tap but didn't drink it. The clock on the microwave said it was seven-forty-nine. We were usually home before five-thirty, dinner at six, eight o'clock was quiet reading in bed if it wasn't lights out.

I plugged my phone into the charger on the counter and waited in the dark. I listened to Camila's muffled voice in Ava's room. Even from that distance I could register Camila's struggle to sound upbeat, the exaggerated rising tones. Soon I could make out the tinny music of one of Ava's iPad games (she normally didn't get "screen time" on school nights), the sound of Camila carefully shutting Ava's door behind her. Camila didn't come to the kitchen right away;



"I'm not an intern, I'm a squire. I'm not an intern, I'm a squire. I'm not an intern, I'm a squire . . ."

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she went into the bathroom and ran the water.

My phone began to glow. The ghostly apple, then the home screen. No delay this time: seventeen new texts, seven new voice mails, three from Camila and four from an unknown number. I listened to those first, bending over awkwardly so the phone could stay plugged in. Hi this is Anna, the after-school coördinator, I'm pretty sure a parent picked up Ava but forgot to check her out before leaving the big yard, I just want to make sure she's with a parent or guardian, please call me back. Hi this is Anna again, trying to reach Ava's parents, I've tried the other number, too, but please call me back, and in the future please make sure to check out with staff before leaving the big yard. This is Anna, I talked to Camila but just wanted to try this number one more time before I head home for the day. I know she's trying to reach you, hope everything's O.K.

I erased the messages without listening to the fourth. I erased all the voice mails from Camila, then I made myself quickly scan the texts: Did you forget to check out again, let me know you have her, let me know you have her and that you're all right, where are you, what do I do, I called Emily, I called Sam, do I call the police, just please please call me, it is fully fucking night, I can't do this, can't live like this, what is happening. I erased the thread.

I left the phone charging on the counter and looked out the back window. There was a cherry tree in our building's small yard, and through its moving branches I could see the lit windows of the much larger building behind ours. I tried to organize my thoughts, what I'd say to Camila. I know it's not the first time I messed up. Camila turned on the light as she walked in and the outside world was gone. I looked at her reflection and saw she'd put her hair up, something she did only when she had an important meeting. In the glass I watched her get a big pot from the bottom cabinet, fill it with water. It took forever. Then she put it on the stove, added salt and oil. A reasonable voice commanded me to turn around and say the reasonable things.

I turned around. Today I was maybe more scattered than normal because this weird thing happened, this man has been calling me, trying to reach someone else, these stray apologies that weren't meant for me, although I guess the last message was. Camila said nothing, looking through the cabinet for one of the multiple boxes of half-used spaghetti; I always opened a new box accidentally. At first it was actually really beautiful, I said, but I was confused about what I was trying to explain, accomplish; what did the beauty have to do with my being unreachable and late? I was just telling her what it was like for me. Hey, did it hail here earlier? For the first time, she looked at me, then looked away.

Her silence was starting to make me angry. It angered me that it was less the silence of justified fury, my partner messed up, than a silence that implied I was crazy, not to be engaged. The carefulness of her movements—slowly pouring in the spaghetti so as to avoid causing a splash, pressing the spaghetti gently but decisively down into the water with a wooden spoon—suggested she must tread lightly because I was unwell. This is unfair, I thought or said. It's unfair because anybody can forget to check out, can have a low battery. It's unfair because if you leave silence around any language it starts to sound crazy, or sound like poetry, unhinged from reality, try it, just don't respond to something a friend or lover or colleague at the library says to you, just let it hang in the air and vibrate and change color.

And then I was telling her how it had changed from this beautiful confusion of the one and the many to these very serious and upsetting threats, that this person knows where we live, do you understand that, it's all online, and because Camila was saying nothing I really had no idea if I was making sense,

which was, it was becoming clear to me, what she wanted: to amplify my confusion and to use that as evidence that I wasn't functional, functioning.

I realized I'd had very little to eat, I'd barely touched my lunch, I still had my Kind bar, and so I interrupted myself to ask: Can you make enough for me? The incongruity—this man is after us, can you make me spaghetti—struck me as funny, and I laughed, it's good to laugh at yourself, but it sounded off, wild, and still she said nothing. It *was* kind of crazy to ask if she could make enough for me when the pasta was halfway done. I tried to explain that I hadn't really eaten, though Ava had had this giant cookie—why withhold it—and that's what Camila responded to, in a surprisingly quiet voice she confirmed: You bought Ava a giant cookie?

I was astounded that she was ignoring everything I was trying to say about the messages and how exposed we were as a family but couldn't pass up an opportunity to dwell on how I'd violated the dessert policy. She herself let Ava have scones from the place on Fort Hamilton all the time, which I pointed out to her. I pointed out that it was pretty fucked up for her to try to "score points" with the cookie thing, but she'd gone silent again. She opened the refrigerator door to get the cauliflower, which Ava liked to eat raw.

The reasonable voice was still there, it was saying you can stop this at any time, but I hated the self-satisfaction of that voice, that voice was on Camila's side, it was beside her on the ferry, and then the other man was mocking me, "good luck," which is not to say that I heard any of these voices, although it's true that my own voice—I couldn't stop talking now, I was on to Argentina—didn't originate in my body, it was like a radio I couldn't turn off, and Camila was rinsing the cauliflower, ignoring me, now she was breaking it up by hand, breaking it up into florets. Eventually I took her by the wrists to make her listen.

In my memory, I'm the only person at the early-morning session, a winter morning in downtown Champaign, but there were probably a couple of others in the back. I felt embarrassed for the panelists, for the woman who introduced them. I wanted to flee, but it was too late, and I was sitting too close to the front, fingering the lanyard they make you wear at such things. O.K., good morning, I think we should get started.

The main speaker was from a university in the South, maybe Emory, his PowerPoint: "Criteria for Deaccession." Is an item out of date or inaccurate, has it been superseded, how often has it been requested in the past ten years, are there duplicates, does the preservation librarian report it's too expensive to repair or maintain, can it be replaced with a digital resource—deep questions about value and time, but he was droning on about them in this bureaucratic way, flattening them into the language of "best practices," addressing me and the empty chairs, addressing no one. And I listened with the terrible knowledge that I was going to have to ask something, that the moderator was going to say, when the panelists concluded their remarks, We have some time for discussion.

I guess I have more of a comment. I'm thinking about how these issues regarding what's stored off site, or what's shredded—I'm thinking about how all the issues around deaccession—well, let me say first that I'm grateful you are all talking about this, I wish more people were here, because everybody in the profession should be talking about this, grappling with it openly, really these conversations should be, should involve the public. People need to understand the relationship between preservation and destruction, I mean, how the former must entail the latter, or there can't be—I mean, the cloud is no solution, that's not a collection, collecting everything is collecting nothing. And I guess I'm thinking about the Genizah, I'm not sure how to pronounce that word, actually, but I recently read a great book about the Cairo Genizah, I'm blanking on the name, but I'm thinking about how in Judaism, as you no doubt know, there are all these rules regarding the storage and ritual burial of texts that contain the name of God, and I guess I'm just commenting about how—about how, setting God aside—I mean, I realize we represent secular institutions, but.



But Camila helped me with this; she had every reason not to, especially when we were taking a break, but she did. We met up in the park for a family day some months after I'd received the voice mails from the man. It was early spring, but warm. I'd brought Ava a new bubble wand, this thing with two handles and a cotton rope in between. She dipped the rope in the bucket, then held the handles up and out in front of her like a little air-traffic controller, and this wind sock of soap formed in front of her, iridescent colors sliding across the surface of the shape as it shifted, separated, burst. She had recently lost her front teeth.

While we watched Ava play, Camila asked if I ever heard again from that guy. It was the first time she'd mentioned him directly. I said no. Do you still have the voice mails, she asked, and I kind of smiled, kind of shrugged. She looked at me for a while and asked, Can I hear them? A tiny wave of anger: She doesn't believe there ever were any messages. But I knew not to honor that anger, not to freeze it or make it bigger, just let the wave pass through me, and it was gone. I located the messages on the cracked screen of my phone, indicated which they were, and held it toward her. The green of the buds on the trees intensified as she listened.

It's just like the phone book, she said, when she finally handed it back. There's nothing magical about the idea that you can link up a name and number and an address, right? It's really no worse than the phone books we grew up with. I nodded, although I disagreed. But then she put her hand on my leg and said: Maybe it's different if you listen the way I did. I mean, in the order I listened in, so that he's sorry in the end? Watch this, Ava was yelling, Dada, watch this. I could hear aircraft noise, birdsong, maybe sirens. Try it, Camila said. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Ben Lerner on lanternflies and invasive voices.

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

BLASTED

The I.R.A., the Brits, and a bomb that shook the nations.

BY AMY DAVIDSON SORKIN

On the evening of October 11, 1984, Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, had her picture taken with a giant blue Teddy bear. It was the prize in a raffle at a gala being held at a club called Top Rank, in the resort town of Brighton, as part of the annual Conservative Party Conference. (Thatcher liked Teddy bears; she had two of her own, Humphrey and Mrs. Teddy, which she sometimes lent out for charitable events.) Thatcher, dressed in an evening gown with an enormous floral ruff, then returned to the Brighton Grand Hotel, where she and her husband, Denis, were staying, in Room 129-130—the Napoleon Suite. Denis went to sleep, but Thatcher, as was her habit, kept working, along with members of her staff. They were going over some papers related to the municipal affairs of Liverpool when, at 2:54 A.M., there was a boom, and then a crash. Plaster began to fall from the ceiling.

Five stories above them, in Room 629, Donald Maclean, the president of the Scottish Conservatives, and his wife, Muriel, were thrown out of their bed and through the air by the force of an explosion close by. He survived, but she died of her injuries weeks later. A bomb had been hidden behind a panel, under the bathtub, in Room 629, a spot that had been carefully chosen to compromise the hotel's large Victorian chimney stack. In the seconds after the bomb detonated, the stack imploded, and was transformed into a funnel through which bricks, granite, and roof tiles rushed down, like a giant knife cutting through each floor.

A fifty-five-year-old woman in Room 628 was decapitated almost instantly. She was Jeanne Shattock, the wife of a local Party chairman. Three more guests were killed in the avalanche of masonry: in Room 528, Eric Taylor, another local official; in 428, Roberta Wakeham, the wife of the Tory chief whip; and, in 328, Sir Anthony Berry, the deputy chief whip. Berry had just returned from walking the two dogs he'd brought with him to Brighton. (Their barking would lead rescuers to Lady Sarah Berry, who was found beneath debris with a broken pelvis.) In Room 228, Norman Tebbit, Thatcher's Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and a top hard-line lieutenant in her bitter confrontation with the miners' union, was buried in rubble along with his wife, also named Margaret; they both survived, though she would be partly paralyzed.

Had Thatcher been in the bathroom of the Napoleon Suite—and she was, two minutes before the bomb went off—there's a good chance that she would have died. Instead, still in her evening dress, she got Denis out of bed and walked placidly from the room. The lobby was crowded with Tory grandees, some in dinner jackets and others in pajamas, many coated in dust. "I think that was an assassination attempt, don't you?" Thatcher said. At that point, there was no clear picture of what had happened, or of whether there might be another bomb. But there were some guesses, as Rory Carroll, an Irish journalist, writes in "There Will Be Fire" (Putnam), a new account of the bombing. (In the U.K., the book is called "Killing Thatcher.") When the Thatchers were put into a car to the Brighton police station, twenty minutes after the bomb went off, Denis, his hair uncombed, was already raging: "The I.R.A., those bastards!"

Carroll can't quite believe that the Brighton bombing, "an attack that had almost wiped out the British government," isn't better commemorated, or more famous. He considers it, reasonably, to be "one of the great what-ifs" of modern history. There are multiple what-ifs built in. What if Thatcher, or other members of the Cabinet, had died? Pretty much all of them were there. Surviving, she had six more years in office, including the run-up to the first Gulf War. What if Norman Tebbit had stayed on the path he was on before the bombing and become, as was expected, Thatcher's successor? Instead, he absented himself from electoral politics in order to care for his badly injured wife, and emerged, from the sidelines, as an increasingly shrill critic of the European Union, helping to drag the country to Brexit. Perhaps most provocative, what if the Provisional Irish Republican Army hadn't chosen to go after the Prime Minister by blowing up a hotel filled with hundreds of people? What if it had forgone an armed struggle altogether? Decades later, the bombing still poses questions about terrorism, politics as violence, and the value of remembering (or of forgetting). The what-ifs persist because the significance of an event



JOHN DOWNING / GETTY; OPPOSITE: LIANA JEGERS

Decades after the violence, the significance of the attack on the Brighton Grand Hotel is still being fashioned.

like this one isn't fixed in the first moment; in Brighton's case, the meaning is still being fashioned.

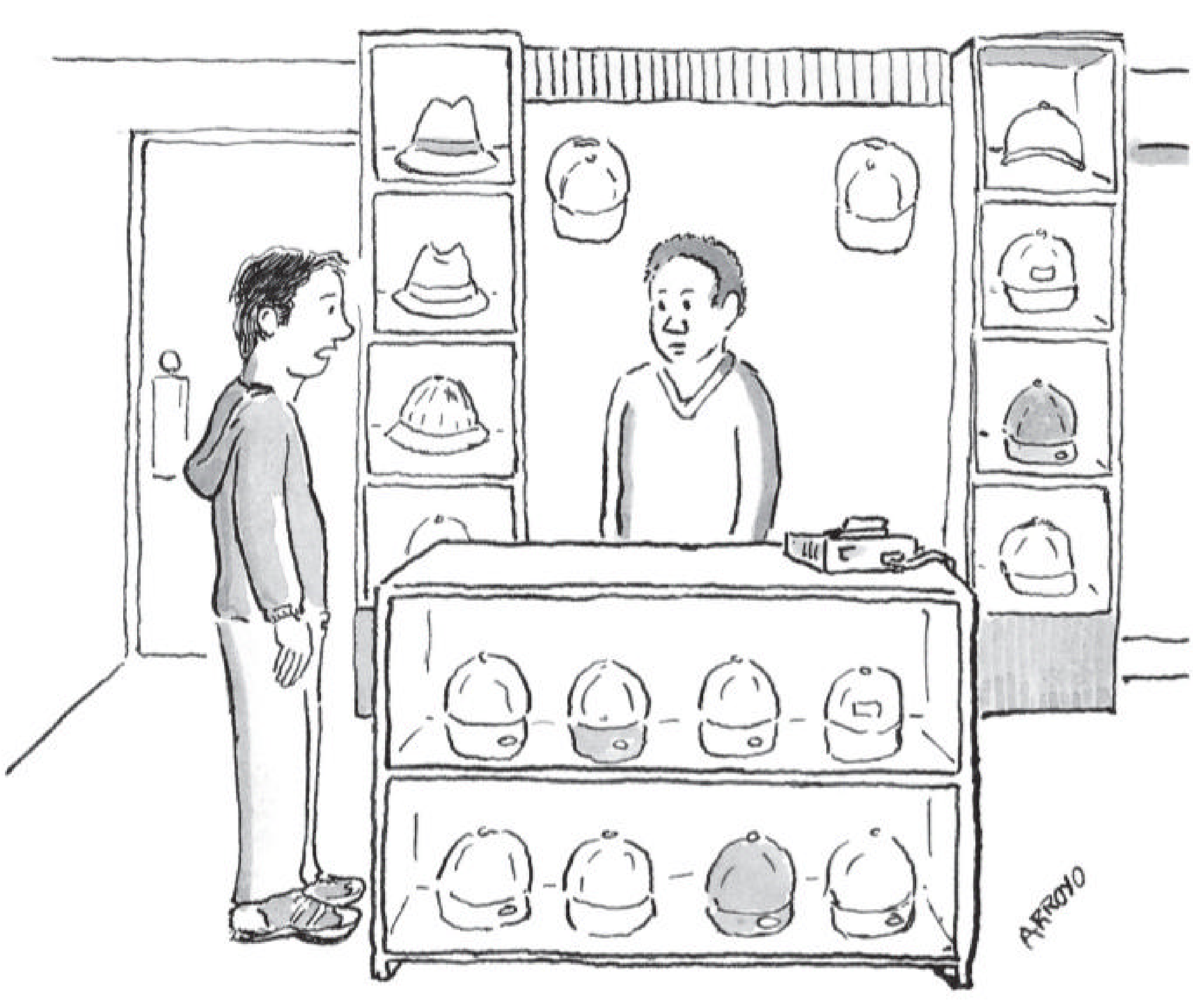
Ireland has no shortage of commemorations. Later this year, it will reach the end of what is officially known as the Decade of Centenaries. The Decade encompasses the 1916 Easter Rising, when armed nationalist groups briefly seized government buildings in Dublin, and the British Army responded with artillery shells and executions. But it also takes note of dates that are part of contrasting mythologies, such as the 1913 formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force by members of the unionist, or loyalist, community, many of whom were the Protestant descendants of Britons who settled in Catholic Ireland through the centuries; the 1921 partition; and the civil war that ushered in the establishment, in December, 1922, of the Irish Free State. (It became the Republic of Ireland in 1937.) Six majority-Protestant counties remained a part of the United Kingdom, and do so to this day, as Northern Ireland.

The Decade, as it unfolded, has stretched to a dozen years—history has a way of lingering—and so will overlap with yet another milestone, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the signing of the 1998 Good Friday, or Belfast, Agreement, on April 10th. The Agreement was a set of accords, between the U.K. and Ireland and between nationalist and unionist groups in Northern Ireland, including Sinn Féin, the political party then associated with the I.R.A. It brought to a close a particularly violent period known as the Troubles, and was only signed on Good Friday, a day after a deadline had expired, because negotiators kept on talking through the night, refusing to give up. ("We dare not let this opportunity pass because we won't get another one like it in this generation," a negotiator said, in the early-morning hours.) The deal is often cited as an example of how, every once in a while, supposedly intractable enmities can be put aside. President Joseph Biden, who was involved in the peace process as a senator, is expected to travel to Dublin and Belfast to celebrate.

Just in time for the anniversary, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Ursula von der Leyen, on behalf of the European Union, struck a deal—endorsed by Ireland—known as the Windsor Framework to resolve problems that Brexit created at the Irish border. The line dividing the Republic and the North is now also the land border between the U.K. and the E.U., of which Ireland remains a member. The deal is a second try, after the U.K. threatened to unilaterally break an earlier protocol it had agreed to, and involves checks on goods entering Northern Ireland from the rest of the U.K. that might make it into the common market. Brexit itself has reopened questions about Northern Ireland's dual identity—British and Irish—and, from another perspective, about the island's incomplete unification.

"There Will Be Fire" is a reminder of just how much the Good Friday Agreement accomplished—how many fires it put out. What had been a civil-rights movement, protesting discrimination against Catholics in Northern Ireland, splintered and took a violent turn that accelerated after the Bloody Sunday of 1972, when British troops fired on a demonstration and killed fourteen people. Between 1977 and 1978, by one count, the I.R.A.'s bombing campaign included some six hundred attacks. Often enough, I.R.A. bombs killed ordinary Irish people—in one case, five cleaning ladies. The British government persisted with a response that was, by turns, indifferent, haphazard, or brutal. The level of collusion between government forces and the primarily Protestant unionist paramilitaries, who were waging their own terror campaign in Belfast, is still a matter of debate. Early in the book, Carroll, who is the Ireland correspondent for the *Guardian*, says that he intends to keep his focus on the Brighton bombing operation, without delving too much into matters such as "IRA attacks on Protestants in border areas, or loyalist targeting of random Catholics, or controversial security force killing." To his credit, he doesn't limit himself overmuch. It's hard to render an episode in a centuries-old struggle as a caper story, but Carroll lets in just enough history to pull it off, mostly.

It helps that the Brighton case, seen as a police procedural, is quite something. In the wake of the bombing, investigators had no idea how long the explosives had been in the hotel or who, among the many I.R.A. members known and unknown to them, had planted them there. (Brighton was a popular spot for extramarital assignations, and a jarring number of people checked into the Grand Hotel under fake names.) Then someone remembered that, in a separate in-



"I need to buy a hat so that the hat I can't find will turn up."

vestigation, the police had stumbled upon a cache of weapons buried in a wooded area. In it were six timers, all set for twenty-four days, six hours, and thirty-six minutes. One seemed to be missing. When investigators counted back to see who had been in Room 629 twenty-four days before the bomb went off, they pulled a registration card in the name of Roy Walsh. No one at the London address he'd given had heard of him. It took more detective work to determine that Walsh's real name was Patrick Magee, and still more—including a tense pursuit through Glasgow, vividly described by Carroll—to track him down.

As a young man living in Belfast in the early seventies, Magee had fallen in with the I.R.A., and had become a bomb-maker even before being further radicalized during a stay in the notorious Long Kesh prison. He was held there for more than two years without being charged, as part of a wildly ill-considered British program of mass detentions. He was, in short, one of the usual suspects; British authorities had nicknamed him the Chancer, because he took risks. It's Carroll's guess that he was given the high-profile Brighton job only because other, likelier candidates had been caught. Magee's identifying mark was a missing fingertip on the pinkie of his right hand—a bomb-maker's occupational hazard.

Thatcher's main antagonist in Carroll's narrative, though, is a different sort of operator: Gerry Adams, who was the head of Sinn Féin from 1983 until 2018. To this day, Adams denies that he was ever a member of the I.R.A., let alone complicit in any violent act, although he is widely known to have been a street-level commander and is believed to have sat on its governing Army Council. In later years, he developed an avuncular image; he, too, claimed to adore Teddy bears. Adams is often described as mysterious—Carroll calls him "sphinxlike"—but the puzzle is not whether he has lied about his past. It is about what he was really up to, and, as with the bombing campaign itself, what his lying has yielded.

Even before the Brighton bombing, Adams was apparently prodding the I.R.A. to pursue a political path alongside its armed struggle, a duality articulated by his ally Danny Morrison at a Sinn Féin conference in 1981: "Will anyone here object if with a ballot paper in this hand and an ArmaLite in this hand we take power in Ireland?" (An ArmaLite is an assault rifle.) Adams kept his hands hidden. His charade meant that, when the peace talks finally began, in the nineteen-nineties, others at the table could have some deniability about whether they were talking to a terrorist. It also meant that he escaped accountability for terrible acts that others had to reckon with. Patrick Radden Keefe, whose book "Say Nothing" explores Adams's culpability in the murder of a widowed mother of ten, writes that, as "chilling" and "sociopathic" as he might be personally, "politically, it would be folly not to sympathize" with Adams's long game. That is about where Carroll comes down, too.



And yet the facts about Adams's involvement in the Brighton operation remain unsettled. Logically, Carroll writes, "Adams alone would have had both a rationale and the authority to veto the plot," the rationale being that the reaction to a Prime Minister's murder—manhunts, reprisals, international condemnation—would have scuttled his political plans. Since the operation was not vetoed, Adams must, ipso facto, have acquiesced. But this is just an inference, as is Carroll's theory that Adams did so to preserve his position amid an internal power struggle. It seems relevant that, at about the time the operation got the green light, Adams himself was recovering from an assassination attempt: loyalist paramilitaries had shot him multiple times as he was driving away from a courthouse in Belfast.

There is another figure in the story, though, who in some ways cuts a bigger profile than anyone else, and that is Bobby Sands. On March 1, 1981, in the H-Blocks of Long Kesh, Sands, a long-haired twenty-six-year-old who wrote poetry and had been arrested after a gunfight, refused to eat. His hunger strike, in which he was joined, at staggered intervals, by other I.R.A. members, centered on demands that Thatcher's government recognize them as political prisoners. Four days into the strike, the British M.P. representing Fermanagh and South Tyrone—a district of Northern Ireland—died of a heart attack, triggering a by-election. Sinn Féin decided to back Sands as a candidate. (He ran on the "Anti H Block" line.) It was not clear that he had a chance of winning. Even many fervently nationalist Catholics in the North were repulsed by the I.R.A.'s tactics (as were a good deal more in the Republic). At the same time, voters believed that, if Sands won, Thatcher would have to offer some concession that would end the hunger strike. As Fintan O'Toole writes in his essential "personal history" of modern Ireland, "We Don't Know Ourselves," "Most of them were not willing to vote for the I.R.A.; but most of them were willing to use their votes to stop several I.R.A. men from dying. This was an ambivalence the British did not understand."

Yet what propelled the drama forward was a distinct lack of ambivalence. Sands was ready to die, and Thatcher was willing to let him do so. The day he was elected to Parliament, by a margin of just over fourteen hundred votes, Sands had been refusing food for more than a month. It is hard to convey the effect of his passion on people around the world, who were mesmerized by what was, in effect, a death watch. It took sixty-six days; before falling into a final coma, Sands had gone blind. Nine more hunger strikers died after him.

Sands's presence in "There Will Be Fire" transforms its tone, at times, from that of "The Day of the Jackal" to something more akin to "The Battle of Algiers." And yet Sands, despite dying three and a half years before Brighton, is inevitably a part of it. In the marches that followed his death, one banner read "Maggie Thatcher murdered Bobby Sands." The I.R.A. would have had antipathy toward any British P.M., but Thatcher, as Carroll writes, came to inspire "a visceral, personal hatred."

One of the subplots in Carroll's book is the role that Americans played in all this. The United States was one of the places that the I.R.A. turned to for money and guns. (It also hit up



Muammar Qaddafi.) At the same time that Magee was busy in Room 629, other I.R.A. operatives were arranging an arms shipment with the help of the Boston gangster Whitey Bulger. The plan went awry when the Marita Ann, one of the boats carrying the weapons, was seized by Ireland's Navy.

The American capacity to excuse or romanticize the I.R.A. has been as much a source of frustration to the citizens of Ireland as to anyone. The British reading of the situation is, basically, that Americans are dopes. Sometimes that verdict is accompanied by ominous references to "the Irish lobby." More than thirty million Americans have what the Census Bureau referred to, in a 2021 press release, as "smiling Irish eyes," meaning that they identified as having Irish heritage in census surveys. And almost a quarter of Americans are Catholic.

What's missing from that formulation is how the Irish experience of mass emigration shaped not only the demographic but the emotional and cultural landscape of the United States—including for those who aren't Irish. The trauma of the famine is a touchstone, but so is the green-joy part. Americans, to an unusually bipartisan degree, wish Ireland well. That engagement has been enhanced, in recent decades, by the fact that Ireland has become the European base for many tech and pharma companies (Apple and Intel have had a presence there since the nineteen-eighties; Pfizer and Bristol Myers since the sixties), a phenomenon, encouraged by the low corporate tax rate, that Brexit is bound to advance. The view of the conflict from this side of the Atlantic may be misty, but it can be a lot clearer than that from across the Irish Sea. A telling detail Carroll notes is that the speech Thatcher intended to give at the Brighton conference barely mentioned Northern Ireland at all.

The day after Sands died, the longshoremen's union in the U.S. told its members not to unload any British-owned ships for twenty-four hours, a boycott that was observed, the UPI reported, "from Puerto Rico to the Great Lakes." When Thatcher appeared in the House of Commons hours after his death, she received the backing of both her own party and the opposition. The only dissenter was Patrick Duffy, a South Yorkshire Labour M.P., who asked if she realized that her "intransigence" regarding Sands, "a fellow Member of Parliament," had cost her government the support of the New York *Times*. (Thatcher replied, "Mr. Sands was a convicted criminal. He chose to take his own life.")

In the end, what may have been the I.R.A.'s most consequential and transformative decision, abroad and at home, was to have Sinn Féin campaign openly for Sands: the hunger and the ballot paper. Asking people in Fermanagh and South Tyrone for their votes accomplished more than asking Whitey Bulger for guns. More victories at the polls for Sinn Féin followed Sands's, along with the day-to-day tasks of holding office. That work included dealing with constituents who didn't want bombs in their neighborhoods.

A year after the Brighton bombing, there was, in turn, a slight shift in Thatcher's approach, with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which gave the Republic a consultative voice in Northern Irish affairs. Carroll explores the possibility that her close call had an effect. But, as he notes, the talks that led to the A.I.A. were already under way, and the bombing might well have delayed a conclusion. The same can be said of the armed struggle writ large, which, in addition to its human costs, helped scuttle progress at key moments. In a backward way, Thatcher's stubborn insistence that the bombing changed nothing might have helped prevent it from changing things for the worse. Still, the violence continued for another decade. Only in 1994 did the I.R.A. agree to a ceasefire, in conjunction with multiparty peace talks.

It's tempting, at this point in the narrative, to insert Americans as the heroic deus ex machina, in the rare postwar deployment of U.S. power abroad that went pretty well: we came, this time, bearing a plan for peace. That fable is not entirely false. O'Toole writes that what President Bill Clinton, in particular, brought to the process was "drama"—a sense that stalemate was

not inevitable, that the cycle could be broken, and that the world was watching. Clinton worked room after room in Belfast and Derry, quoting lines from Seamus Heaney. There was more at work, of course, including the influence of the E.U., which offered venues for Anglo-Irish diplomacy. A focus on Adams's scheming can obscure the crucial work of other nationalist groups, such as Northern Ireland's Social Democratic and Labour Party and the S.D.L.P. leader John Hume, who agitated for Irish unification without killing people. (Hume shared the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize with the unionist David Trimble.)

One of the central principles of the Good Friday Agreement is that there is no single way to be Irish. It was treated as a turning point when the 2021 Northern Ireland census showed, for the first time, that more people had been brought up in Catholic than in Protestant households, but a fair number said that they weren't religious at all. And the percentage of Catholics in the Republic has fallen to seventy-eight, a number that includes many whose first language is Polish or Portuguese. The I.R.A., for that matter, was never as Catholic, in a religious sense, as its martyrology might suggest, in part because it also had a Marxist streak. Today, Sinn Féin is the largest party in the North, and one of the largest in the Republic, not because of its militancy but because of its Bernie Sanders-like social program. Mary Lou McDonald, who succeeded Adams as the Party's leader, has a decent chance of becoming the next Taoiseach, or Prime Minister.

The other guiding Good Friday principle is "consent." The Agreement was ratified in simultaneous referendums in Northern Ireland (where it passed with seventy-one per cent of the vote) and the Republic (winning an astonishing ninety-four per cent). And it made a provision for future dual referendums, to unite Ireland, at a date uncertain but defined by when it was likely to pass. In some ways, the biggest leap of faith was an agreement to release, within two years, prisoners affiliated with armed groups that accepted the deal. It was not a blanket amnesty, and dissension about accountability remains. But hundreds of people convicted of serious violent crimes were let go. (The U.S., land of mass incarceration and Guantánamo, serves as a guarantor of the accords; we can be more generous with the Irish than we are with ourselves.) One of them was Patrick Magee, the Brighton bomber. He, at least, rewarded that trust by appearing at peace events in what Carroll calls "a reconciliation double-act" with Jo Berry, the daughter of Sir Anthony, of Room 328. "Her father must have been a fine human being and I killed him. I think that, more than anything else," Magee has said.

This would all make for a pat conclusion were it not for Brexit, as destructive a move as any Western nation has inflicted on itself in recent memory. One reason Brexit was so difficult is that its advocates were never really willing to see Ireland's position. They decided to draw a hard line between themselves and Europe, even though the Good Friday peace had come to depend on the actual line between the U.K. and the E.U.—the intra-Irish border—being unobtrusive. Today, the holdout to the Windsor Framework is the Democratic Unionist Party, which objects to what it sees as a new intra-U.K. border in the Irish Sea, and has been threatening to upend the power-sharing arrangements central to the Good Friday Agreement. The D.U.P. is said to fear losing ground to more extreme unionists if it compromises. But it also risks losing the support of people in its own community who value the fact that, under the Framework, the North retains some connection to the E.U., with the attendant benefits. The D.U.P. backed Brexit—and yet it's Brexit that's provided a new argument for unifying all of Ireland.

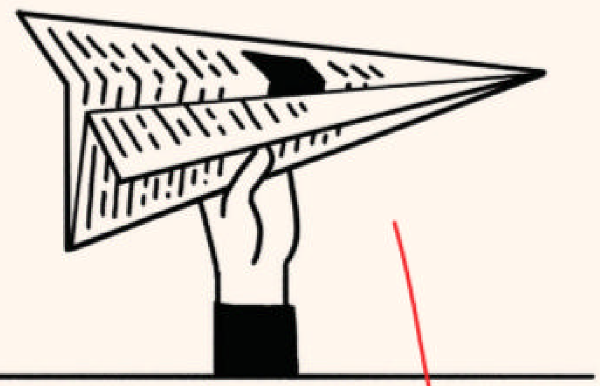
What's clear is that the Brexit idea about how Britain's withdrawal from Europe would work depended on a vague assumption that the E.U. would throw Ireland under the bus, and that the U.S. would, too, in the rush to conclude a free-trade deal with Britain. That didn't happen. The architects of Brexit hadn't factored in the depth of the commitment everyone else had to what was won on Good Friday. And now the U.K. is increasingly a land of stagnation, strikes, and disappointment. When you set off a bomb, you don't always know where the roof is going to cave in. ♦

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BOOKS

IT'S NOT THAT DEEP

How Preston Sturges found life on the surface.

BY RACHEL SYME



Barbara Stanwyck, Preston Sturges, and Henry Fonda filming "The Lady Eve."

EVERETT

In 1941, when Preston Sturges, the master of the screwball comedy, won the first Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, he stumbled onstage and attempted a joke. Sturges, who won for "The Great McGinty"—a satire about a poor man, in an unnamed American city, who fails upward until he becomes governor—wasn't fond of institutions and their puffed-up accolades, and his speech, which ridiculed the ceremony, was particularly on brand. "Mr. Sturges was so overcome by the mere possibility of winning an Oscar," he said, "that he was unable to come here tonight, and asked me to accept in his stead." The room went quiet, Sturges recalled, and he slunk back to his table. His gag had bombed.

Or had it? In truth, everyone in the room likely knew who Sturges was. By the time he made "The Great McGinty," he was one of the highest-paid men in Hollywood, pulling in ludicrous sums for a single screenplay. His contract with Paramount insured that he could direct his own scripts, minting him as one of cinema's first major auteurs. In 1940, he had released two films ("McGinty" and "Christmas in July"), shot another ("The Lady Eve"), and opened the Players Club, a rowdy, two-story restaurant and night club on Sunset Boulevard, where he held court among industry nabobs. If Sturges's speech was coolly received, it was not, as he suggested, because "nobody knew what I looked like." The more probable reason is that, in a room packed with vain celebrities, nobody found it even slightly amusing that a person, when offered a moment of glory, might pretend to be someone else.

But Sturges was a fan of false fronts. He believed that how someone presented himself—his actions, his appearance, whatever name he chose on a given day—was as revelatory as any "true self" within. He was not a director who sought to probe the depths of humanity. The exquisite irony of being alive, he thought, was that, despite our genuine desires, we still had to walk around in the meat suits of our bodies, trying to get by. There was an essential tension between who we believed we were and the person others saw, and this tension lent life its absurdity, its richness, and its potential for surprise.

Take "The Lady Eve," perhaps Sturges's most beloved film, in which Henry Fonda plays Charles (Hopsie) Pike, a lanky heir to an ale fortune who dabbles as a snake expert. While travelling on a cruise ship, Hopsie falls for a con woman named Jean Harrington (Barbara Stanwyck). After realizing that Jean has been deceiving him, he sulks off to his Connecticut manor, where he encounters Jean again, though this time she has disguised herself as Lady Eve Sidwich, a louche aristocrat. The zany setup involves several layers of self-deception: There is the idle rich boy who thinks he's a bona-fide scientist (he is not) and the grifter who thinks she's pulling off a brilliant ruse by slapping on some diamonds (she is not). Jean believes herself too pragmatic to fall in love, and Hopsie believes himself too clever to fall into a woman's trap. (They're both wrong.) Although Jean can't see herself clearly, she has a hawklike ability to spot the delusions of others. She knows how to pick a vulnerable mark precisely because she shares Sturges's eye for people putting on an act.

An early scene makes this especially vivid. In the ship's dining room, Jean, who has not yet spoken to Hopsie, spies on him with a mirror from her evening bag. A carrousel of young women are trying to attract the bachelor, who sits

alone, reading a tome titled "Are Snakes Necessary?" Stanwyck's commentary on the spectacle—a spin on a technique that Sturges called "narratage," in which a character delivers a monologue during a montage or a flashback—is wry and chatty, as though she were a mouthpiece for the audience. (You can draw a straight line from Jean Harrington to "Fleabag.") As one glossy-haired débutante decides whether to make her approach, Jean digs in: "You see those nice store teeth, all beaming at you? Oh, she recognizes you! She's up! She's down! She can't make up her mind! She's up again! She recognizes you! She's coming over to speak to you! The suspense is killing me!" The repetition, paired with a certain ditziness of tone, captures the silly, often disingenuous dance of flirtation, its choreographed guile. Of course, Jean is trying to seduce Hopsie, too; she's both inside the scene and critiquing it, a heckler trapped onstage. Sturges passes no judgment on this fact. It's enough, for him, that it's funny.

Few genres are more desperately tied to the tracks of their times than comedy. It's still enjoyable to see Abbott and Costello joust over a linguistic misunderstanding, but an act such as "Who's on First?" was much funnier in 1938, when audiences knew that it was mocking the nicknames of popular baseball players. Humor tends to wilt through the decades; what was once a bite becomes a sloppy kiss. Not so with Sturges. In 1990, the *Times* critic Vincent Canby, writing about a New York showcase of the director's work, argued that Sturges's films not only balk at narrative convention but buck expectations so completely that each viewing feels like a radically different experience. "When, at last, a movie fails to change, one may be sure the movie is dead, ready for chilly embalming at the hands of academe," Canby wrote. "This retrospective demonstrates that anyone who attempts to embalm Sturges does so at risk."

Of course, the embalming had to come eventually. In "Crooked, but Never Common: The Films of Preston Sturges" (Columbia), the veteran film critic Stuart Klawans performs the kinds of close, obsessive readings that one rarely encounters outside a graduate seminar. By analyzing Sturges's every move, Klawans hopes to pin the director down—to "read" his films as if they were "reasoned arguments about subjects of real concern." In the book's opening pages, Klawans informs us that he will not be offering "yet another overview of Sturges's life." There are plenty of other books for that, including studious biographies by Diane Jacobs and by James Curtis, as well as Sturges's unfinished memoir, which his fourth and final wife, Sandy Sturges, cobbled together for publication in 1990, thirty-one years after Sturges died.

Still, the broad strokes are worth noting. Preston Sturges was born in Chicago in 1898, to a travelling-salesman father and a mother named Mary Dempsey. Dempsey was a creative type, the sort of searcher who, in the Gilded Age, was known as an adventuress. When Sturges was a toddler, Dempsey tried to become a singer in France, but her career fizzled, her marriage ended, and she returned to the U.S. to wed Solomon Sturges, a buttoned-up financier who treated Preston as his own child. Dempsey refused to stop wandering, however. She went back to Europe, changed her name to Mary d'Esti, took an interest in witchcraft, and began palling around with the modern dancer Isadora Duncan. She went by many names and told many fabulous lies. She said that she had been fifteen when Sturges was born, that she had attended medical school, that she was descended from Italian royalty. Sturges later wrote, "My mother was in no sense a liar, nor even intentionally unacquainted with the truth. . . . She was, however, endowed with such a rich and powerful imagination that anything she had said three times, she believed fervently. Often, twice was enough."

D'Esti schlepped Sturges around like a steamer trunk, but she regularly shipped him back to America, where he stayed with his stepfather for months at a time. As a result, Sturges's childhood was marked by whiplash: between home and Europe, between a rigid capitalist ethic and a sybaritic salon culture. It is not difficult to see how this created a bemused sense of dissociation, along with a healthy skepticism of his parents' best intentions. His mother wanted him to be sophisticated, but in practice this meant dragging him to the opera and alienating him from his peers. His stepfather wanted him to go into finance—Sturges worked for several New York stockbrokers as a teen—but he didn't care for the field, and he joined the Army during the First World War.

A turning point came in 1927, when Sturges was in his late twenties. He was working for his mother's perfume business in New York, and d'Esti and Duncan were travelling in Nice. Duncan decided to join a dashing French auto mechanic for a car ride, and she insisted on wearing a red silken scarf that d'Esti had given her. According to Sturges's memoir, Duncan called out "*Mes amis, je vais à la gloire*"—"My friends, I am off to glory"—before the car peeled out. Her scarf, flapping in the breeze, became caught in the car's front wheel, snapping her neck and killing her. The accident devastated Sturges's mother—she died three years later, still distraught—but subtly imprinted on Sturges as a prime example of how an action meant to be glamorous could, instead, render a scene darkly absurd. That year, he began dating an actress who confessed that she had only pretended to find him charming, and that she was using him to test her ideas for a play. Sturges, as revenge, decided to write one himself. He finished it in just a few months; then he wrote another, "Strictly Dishonorable," in less than a week. It ran on Broadway for a year.

By 1932, Sturges was living in Los Angeles and being paid exorbitant fees to write comic screenplays. But, when directors adapted his work, something was getting lost. They would play it too straight, or move too quickly through kooky side plots, though Sturges felt that much of a film's energy could spring from a bit player with a handful of lines. In 1939, he sold "The Great McGinty" to a Paramount producer for ten dollars, with the stipulation that Sturges oversee the project himself. This marked the birth of the writer-director as a concept, and the start of one of the hottest streaks in film history. Sturges churned out seven pictures for Paramount in four years, including classics such as "The Palm Beach Story," "The Miracle at Morgan's Creek," and "Hail the Conquering Hero."

Klawans, like many before him, notes the echoes of Sturges's life in his work: the juxtaposition of bohemians and

stern squares, the fluency in both American vernacular and European argot, the linking of slapstick and hypocrisy. But he also wants to make this reading "wobble a bit," and he peers between every snappy line for cultural references, Biblical allegories, political sympathies, and philosophies about love and suffering. A Sturges film, Klawans believes, is more than just its witty banter: "One of the chief distractions from thinking your way through the films is their most universally admired trait: the dialogue."

This is a compelling idea, but it misses what makes Sturges's films so fascinating. His rat-a-tat scripts aren't running cover for some hidden meaning; they *are* the meaning. His characters make sense because they slip the yoke of explanation. In "The Palm Beach Story" (1942), Sturges's effervescent comedy of remarriage, Gerry Jeffers (Claudette Colbert) is the broke wife of a broke inventor named Tom (Joel McCrea). One day, a stranger touring her New York apartment—a bespectacled ground-meat magnate who calls himself the Wienie King—hands her enough money for rent, a new dress, and a drunken dinner. In most films, this would mark the ending: the couple is spared eviction and lives happily ever after. Sturges, though, is just getting started. The following sequence—in which Gerry wakes up the next morning, decides to leave Tom, and strikes out for Florida in search of a wealthier mate—so thoroughly skirts the usual conventions of plot (internal motivation, cause and effect) that viewers are left grasping. Why would Gerry leave her husband just when their prospects have brightened? Why does she think Florida, of all places, will solve her problems? Yet the result conjures the mysteries of real life, in which, as Tom notes, "the way you are is the way you have to be."

That belief pervades one of Sturges's final films, "Unfaithfully Yours" (1948), starring Rex Harrison as Sir Alfred de Carter, a natty orchestra conductor who believes that his wife (Linda Darnell) is having an affair. While conducting a symphony in three movements, de Carter has three visions of catching his wife in the act, including one in which he uses a voice recorder to entrap her lover before stabbing his wife to death. In a raucous set piece, de Carter, trying to pull off one of the schemes, fails so outrageously that he destroys his apartment. He repeatedly trips over his phone cord, he can't fit his hands into gloves, he can't stop sneezing, he breaks a chair attempting to pull the recorder off a shelf. When he finally manages to retrieve the device, he finds the instructions impenetrable. ("So Simple It Operates Itself!" the directions claim.) Klawans aptly describes this scene as "a solid fifteen minutes of slapstick indignity"—it goes on for so long, and Harrison is so pathetic in it, that it becomes almost moving. In de Carter's erudite, arrogant mind, he is a genius who can get away with murder. In reality, he is clumsy and useless. It is not our private yearnings but our public follies that finally define us.



"You make a great point, but can you not?"

Klawans makes a case for Sturges as a topnotch visual director, a quality obscured, he thinks, by Sturges's facility on the page. The author spends many chapters poring over two-shots and camera angles, music cues and credit sequences, the "breakneck tempo" that became a "defining trait of his style." The result honors the full, thrilling scope of Sturges's craft, though one senses that any magic in the frame flowed from the magic of the scripts. "Directing was easy for me, because I was a writer-director," Sturges wrote in his memoir. "It was probably harder for a regular director," who "had to read the script the night before shooting started and do a little homework." Sturges was being glib, of course; he knew that there was more to directing than memorizing the screenplay. But he did believe that the profession was becoming too precious, and he made an entire film lampooning the self-regard that he saw spreading among his peers.

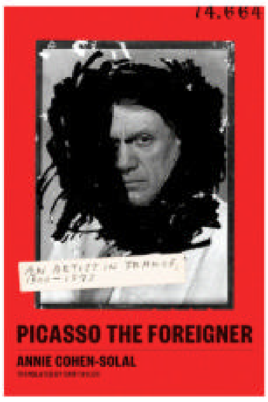
"Sullivan's Travels," my favorite Sturges work, follows Joe Sullivan (Joel McCrea), the writer and director of light, hugely popular comedies such as "Hey Hey in the Hayloft" and "Ants in Your Plants of 1939." Sullivan is famous, beloved, and very wealthy, but he also wants to be *serious*, and he decides that his next film will be a socially conscious drama about poverty called "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" (The fake movie was turned into a real one by Joel and Ethan Coen, Sturges superfans.) Sullivan's butler tells him that this is a terrible idea—the poor don't want to see films about their troubles, and the rich will buy tickets only out of guilt—but Sullivan pursues the project with brio. As research, he pretends to live as a pauper, and a studio bus follows him as he tramps across the country, carrying a bindle. He eventually lands in a work camp full of downtrodden men, whose only joy is watching Warner Bros. cartoons in a small church. With a shock, he realizes that he was wrong: comedy is cathartic in a way that drama can never be. As Sturges wrote, "I saw a couple of pictures put out by some of my fellow comedy-directors which seemed to have abandoned the fun in favor of the message. I wrote 'Sullivan's Travels' to satisfy

an urge to tell them that they were getting a little too deep-dish; to leave the preaching to the preachers."

If Klawans stumbles, it's because, for all his trenchant analysis, he veers too often into deep-dish territory. There is a moral impulse to put Sturges in context, to show how the church scenes in "Sullivan's Travels" relate to the religious fervor of the day, or to reveal how the work-camp scene comments on the Roosevelt Administration. These readings aren't wrong, but they favor the message over the fun. In fact, upon rewatching Sturges, one realizes that most movies today do the same. Oscars are still awarded largely to solemn, neatly packaged studies of social issues; blockbusters, straining to cater to everyone, forgo invention, idiosyncrasy, and the tang of irony. Even Sturges felt the market contracting for sophisticated, elegant comedies: "Efforts to make all motion picture plays suitable to all ages from the cradle to the grave have so emasculated, Comstocked and bowdlerized this wonderful form of theatre that many adults have been driven away from it entirely." We live in an age of slickness and hypocrisy, fake news and extreme wealth. Sturges would likely look around and see a lot of fodder for a good script.

Not that he lacked material. In 1944, Sturges launched a production studio with the volatile billionaire Howard Hughes. The venture imploded, and Sturges became a sort of beleaguered journeyman, releasing a few poorly received American films and one stinker of a farce in France. The I.R.S. put a lien on his assets—the Players Club hadn't paid taxes in years—and Sturges sank deep into debt. In 1956, he moved into the Algonquin Hotel after agreeing to stage a play called "The Golden Fleecing," but he was fired when one of the financiers, in the midst of a nervous breakdown, allegedly tried to helm the production himself. It was the kind of dénouement that Sturges would revel in: a once powerful Hollywood icon, by dint of his own actions, ends up jobless, on the other side of the country, and at the mercy of another director's hubris. But Sturges didn't take it too seriously. He scrounged up a book contract and began his final act of self-mythology, a memoir he never got to finish. The working title was "The Events Leading Up to My Death." You have to laugh. ♦

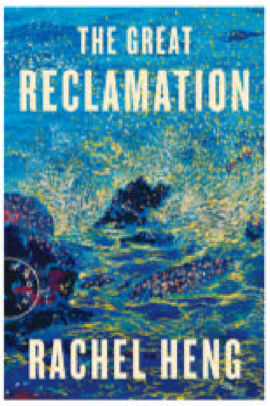
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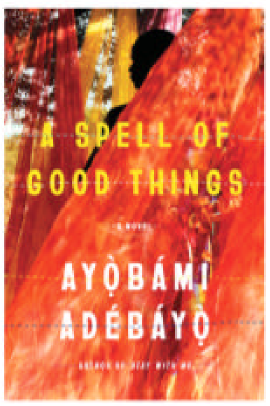
Picasso the Foreigner, *by Annie Cohen-Solal, translated from the French by Sam Taylor (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* Born in Málaga, Spain, in 1882, Pablo Picasso settled in France in 1904. Cohen-Solal, a cultural historian, draws on dossiers found in French police archives, which include interrogation transcripts, rent receipts, and other material, to document the surveillance to which Picasso was subjected by the authorities, who considered him to be an "intruder." Her biography illuminates Picasso's paradoxical situation, in which the institutional forces "obsessed with the idea of a national cultural purity" viewed him with suspicion even as he was idolized by French galleries and critics.



Spoken Word, *by Joshua Bennett (Knopf).* This rich hybrid of memoir and history surveys the institutions that have shaped spoken-word poetry for the past five decades, from the Nuyorican Poets Café, in Manhattan, to the Get Me High Lounge, in Chicago, where the poetry slam originated, and the Internet—now perhaps the genre's predominant venue. Bennett, a poet himself, pays tribute to his literary forebears, such as Miguel Algarín. Bookended with accounts of state-sponsored performances—the author's own, alongside Lin-Manuel Miranda, at the White House, in 2009, and Amanda Gorman's recitation at President Biden's Inauguration, in 2021—the book also chronicles the mainstreaming, for better or worse, of a radical tradition.



The Great Reclamation, *by Rachel Heng (Riverhead).* The reserved, thoughtful protagonist of this novel grows up amid the shifting political regimes of mid-twentieth-century Singapore, where he strives to balance his loyalty to the traditional life of his fishing village with the appeal of the modern future promised by the government. As the novel proceeds from his discovery of islands that appear and disappear under mysterious circumstances to the new government's creation of "brick buildings that gave the illusion of solidity on what the kampong knew was wet and shifting soil," it illustrates the unsteadiness of both the physical environment and personal and political allegiances during a time of overwhelming historical change.



A Spell of Good Things, *by Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀ (Knopf).* Set in contemporary Nigeria, this novel of radical class divisions examines political and domestic abuse through the stories of Ẹniọlá, a boy from an impoverished family, and Wúràọlá, a wealthy young medical resident who is engaged to the son of an aspiring politician. The lives of Adébáyọ̀'s characters are circumscribed by money and gender: Ẹniọlá is routinely humiliated for his poverty, beaten by his teachers, and even spat on, while Wúràọlá, enmeshed in cultural expectations of marriageability, hides her fiancé's increasingly violent assaults from her family. A prayerlike refrain echoes through the novel: "God forbid, God forbid bad thing." But all of Adébáyọ̀'s characters are inexorably drawn into the violence that leaks from profound societal inequities as they journey toward the terrifying moment in which their stories converge.

THE THEATRE

FAMILIAR HAUNTS

A sonically thrilling revival of "Sweeney Todd" on Broadway.

BY HELEN SHAW



Josh Groban and Annaleigh Ashford star as the demon barber and his landlady.

"There's a hole in the world / Like a great black pit / And the vermin of the world / Inhabit it," a stone-faced Sweeney Todd snarls, after the enthusiastic sailor Anthony burbles at him about coming home to London. Their conversation is the first in the much anticipated Broadway revival of "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," at the Lunt-Fontanne—and, particularly with Times Square just outside, the most relatable. The great black pit's nearby, but we're all pie-eyed Anthonys. There's no scowl dour enough, no blood spurt red enough, to quell a theatre full of people eager for this new production of Stephen Sondheim's beloved horror operetta, starring the pop-classical superstar Josh Groban as Sweeney and the Tony Award winner Annaleigh Ashford as his landlady, Mrs. Lovett. A twenty-six-person orchestra plays like mad under the stage, but the audience, on the verge of mob hysteria, provides its own dynamics, screaming before Sweeney's razor ever catches the light.

We take our seats looking at the underside of a great bridge, a huge brick arch occupying most of the stage. The lighting designer, Natasha Katz, makes the night in this shadowy realm seem deeper with fog and moonlight—we're down where the mud larks go, those who scavenge the Thames's banks, looking for flotsam to sell. The director, Thomas Kail, and his choreographer, Steven Hoggett, start the show by making the ensemble seem to materialize from the blackness. "Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd," the company sings, hauling Sweeney himself up out of the ground and hurling him toward us. His white face and ratty beard make him look like something that the mud larks have fished out of the river.

Sweeney is a nightmare barber who cuts his clients' throats, sometimes for good reason, sometimes out of sheer homicidal exuberance. Mrs. Lovett adores him, not least because he's useful for her pie-making business: corpses slide off his barber's chair, down a chute, and into her bakehouse. (Meat's expensive, she explains, and "them pussy cats is quick.") The grim, exhilarating, Tony Award-winning 1979 musical—with music and lyrics by Sondheim and a book by Hugh Wheeler—was inspired by a 1970 play by Christopher Bond, who fleshed out an iconic figure from the Victorian penny-dreadful tradition. Every production contains the source material's doughlike flexibility. You can pat it (John Doyle's small-cast, chamber-size iteration, from 2005); you can poke it (the Tooting Arts Club's 2017 production, which crammed the audience into a tiny, purpose-built pie shop); you can even mark it with your script in hand (the New York Philharmonic's 2014 concert version). It always works. That's the thing about English music-hall entertainment, right, luv? It'll make do wi' whatever you've got.

The plot is a deliberately gamy melodrama. Sweeney Todd, having escaped from Australia after fifteen years' exile there on a trumped-up charge, wants vengeance: the diabolical Judge Turpin (Jamie Jackson) and his slimy Beadle (John Rapson, deliciously corrupt) deported him to get to his beautiful wife, Lucy, whose sexual and mental destruction forms the story's tragic linchpin. Turpin has taken and raised Sweeney's daughter, Johanna (Maria Bilbao), and, when our cheerful sailor Anthony (Jordan Fisher) happens to fall for the now grown girl, the plot gears mesh. If you put the music to one side (you can't, but *say* you could), you might notice that director Kail's staging is a bit ragged. There's some difficulty in hearing spoken text over underscoring, and the physical storytelling stumbles; for instance, the choreography for Lucy's assault elides the particulars so much as to be unread-

ILLUSTRATION BY LIVIA GIORGINA CARPINETO

able. Kail, best known for directing "Hamilton," does put his own stamp on the material—an elaborate letter handoff is one apparent bit of self-quotation—but he makes only a small impression. Sondheim's sooty, sour-hearted music and lyrics are the things that etch themselves into your mind. And listening to a Broadway orchestra play, at full strength, Jonathan Tunick's original arrangements is like getting musically mugged: *whammo*—you wake up in an alley surrounded by piccolos.

"He served a dark and a vengeful god," the chorus sings of Sweeney. That's not the rueful, slight, broken man we meet in this production. Groban's exquisite baritone is so angelic, so carefully placed, that it draws back the curtains of the show's own gloom. It also wouldn't menace a mouse, so he cedes the show's primary energy to Ashford's hilarious version of Lovett, who's ready to wreck their plans, the stage, the show as long as it serves her chaotic shtick. Playing the nutty Ernie to Groban's neurotic Bert, she employs a combination of clown physicality (she bows to the judge halfway down the stairs, a posture that she maintains, bumpily, all the way to the bottom of the flight) and peripatetic zaniness; every time she pecks at the reluctant Groban, fluttering all over him, it looks as though someone threw a chicken in his face.

But, then, he's at a theatrical disadvantage. In Mimi Lien's set, Groban's character is often "upstairs," which places him on a platform, behind a sight-line-spoiling railing, while Ashford gets to prowl the stage lip. Up those dozen stairs, he seems miles away. Get him down by the footlights, though, with the company's incredible sopranos shrieking their siren-high "Sweeney! Sweeney!," and he's in business. (This is a young and handsome cast, but only in one moment—when Groban grips Ashford by the jaw, dancing her backward—do you get a sense of how erotic and scary the pair might have been.) With the light-spirited Ashford pickpocketing scenes instead of stealing them, the main emotional weight is carried by the deranged Beggar Woman (Ruthie Ann Miles), a character who is cast aside with increasing brutality, and Mrs. Lovett's little helper lad, Tobias (Gaten Matarazzo), who turns out to be the soul of the show. Miles and Matarazzo are both tremendous, but, again, Kail's staging takes their big moments and muddies them—he keeps losing characters at various peripheries.

"Sweeney Todd" captures our secret fear of our neighbors: it makes the barber's crimes lurid, so we don't feel the city's nearer, subtler cuts. But is it actually scary? Sonically thrilling, yes, but a frolicking Lovett and her sad Sweeney couldn't, in the end, chill my blood. For me, a production downtown at the Connelly Theatre, the Bedlam Theatre Company's presentation of Talene Monahon's startling "The Good John Proctor," managed to deliver a higher fright-per-minute ratio. The show is modest by comparison, with just four actors (Sharlene Cruz, Brittany K. Allen, Tavi Gevinson, and Susannah Perkins), all excellent, to "Sweeney"'s twenty-five. Each embodies a figure familiar from Arthur Miller's "The Crucible"—the innocent girl playing with poppets, the woman outsider with mysterious wisdom, the religious hysteric, and the adolescent whose sexual relationship with John Proctor kicks off the whole Salem-witch-trial mess. The girls speak in modern argot, because, even though their work includes churning butter, there's nothing old-fashioned about how the unseen, adult Proctor smashes through an eleven-year-old child's trust.

Sarah Ruhl's "Becky Nurse of Salem" also issued a tart feminist corrective to "The Crucible," but Monahon's play places its hand on a deeper set of powers, conjuring awful tensions out of the juxtaposition of girlhood and the abyss. Under Caitlin Sullivan's confident direction, "The Good John Proctor" has the sense of palpable dread that "Sweeney Todd"—so grand and frequently sensorially ravishing—lacks. The girls talk a lot about going into "The Woods," a source of forbidden knowledge, and there are certainly creepy scenes, lit by a single lantern, of them crawling through underbrush. They think they're inching toward something dangerous, but we know that the lasting harm has already been done. I shook off the grimness of "Sweeney" only a few minutes after leaving the theatre; I will buy the cast recording (there will surely be one), but I'll listen to it merrily. Monahon's poison, though, still hasn't worked its way out of my system. When she says the world is a great black pit, I believe her. ♦


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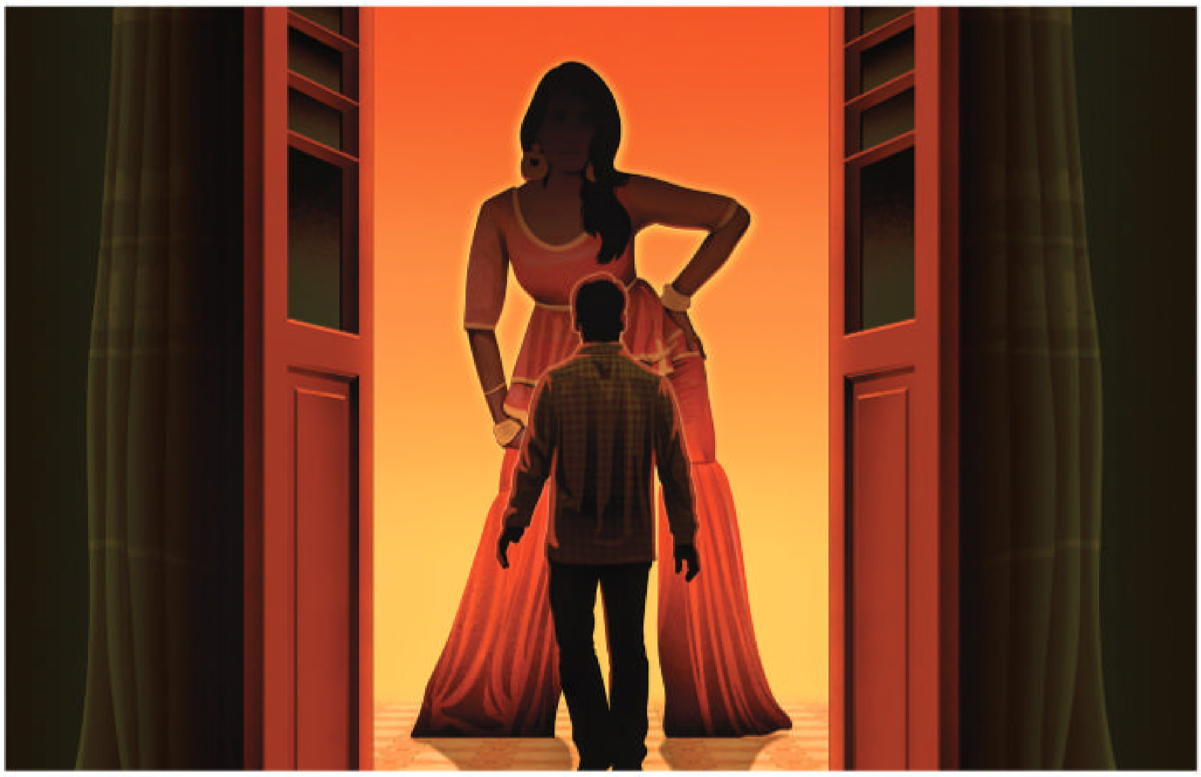
OUTLIERS

"Joyland" and "Acidman."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Trying to sort out who is who, and what everybody wants, is no easy task in "Joyland," a début feature from the Pakistani director Saim Sadiq. In Lahore, a woman named Nucchi (Sarwat Gilani), who already has three daughters, remarks that her water has broken; she might as well be announcing that dinner is served. For the birth of her fourth child, she is ferried to hospital on the back of a moped driven by Haider (Ali Junejo), whom we take to be her husband. Not so. He is, in fact, the brother of her husband, Saleem (Sameer Sohail). Haider is married to Mumtaz (Rasti Farooq); they have no offspring, to the dismay of his aged father, known as Abba (Salmaan Peerzada). All of the above inhabit one household. It's not a peaceful place, or an especially happy one, but it's home.

That home is worth dwelling on, for it feels like a book of short stories. Not for a while—not, perhaps, since Greta Gerwig's "Little Women" (2019)—have I been struck by so potent a sense of place. The daily routine revolves around a central courtyard, where Abba, a widower in a wheelchair, presides. "My family has lived here since before Partition," he says. Space is tight, and one of the little girls often shares a bed with Haider and Mumtaz. The air-conditioning breaks down. (Power outages are frequent across the city, and some scenes are illuminated by cell-phone flashlights.) The fabric of the film is a weaving of new and old; we hear talk of Netflix subscriptions, yet one shot, of an open doorway, has the pious composure of a Pieter de Hooch interior, from seventeenth-century Holland, and the plot begins, if you please, with a goat being slaughtered in the courtyard. Blood pools darkly on the tiled floor.



"Joyland," by the Pakistani director Saim Sadiq, takes us by sensory surprise.

By rights, the slaying is Haider's responsibility, but his nerve fails him, and his wife has to wield the knife. Abba looks on with shame, aghast at such weakness of will, and, to make things worse, Haider is unemployed; Mumtaz, who does bridal makeup, is the wage earner. If there is sexual intimacy between them, we scarcely witness it. Haider, in other words, is falling shy of everything that society expects of him, yet he is too sweet-natured to rebel; what to do? Luckily, he is offered work at—wait for it—an erotic dance theatre. He says that he's the manager, but the truth is that he's been hired as a backing dancer for a performer named Biba (Alina Khan). Haider can't dance to save his life, but hey: a job's a job.

As it happens, dancing *does* save Haider's life, or, at any rate, tips it fruitfully upside down. There is a vital sequence on a rooftop—an airy release from the cramped conditions of domesticity—in which Biba, impatient with Haider's want of grace, takes his shirt off. Thus liberated, he starts to move, for the first time, with a flourish, but what he's getting from Biba is not just a lesson in dance. Unmistakably, as he spins, the two of them fall in love. Which means that she is the answer to dreams that Haider didn't even know he had, because Biba is a trans woman. Abba is going to be thrilled.

Played by Khan with a tough gusto, Biba is as mettlesome as she has to be in order to survive. The simplest deeds are a trial; the train cars, for example, are segregated by gender, but, when Biba parks herself in the female section, a woman tells her, "Son, you can't sit here." As if to compensate for such indignity, Biba is formidable on her own turf—at the theatre, that is, where her backing dancers, all male, take a whipping from her temper. Haider gloms on to her like a loyal pet, but, when he proffers his body, she fends him off and cries, "Get the fuck out, you faggot." Identity politics, as ignited by this film, is not a cause but a furnace. Gentleness is boiled up with spite.

You could, if you were commending "Joyland" to friends, call it a devastating indictment of transphobia and misogyny in an unreconstructed patriarchy, and you'd be right. But such a description says next to nothing about the actual experience of watching the film. (Also, you want your friends to *want* to see it, don't you?) Sadiq is not lecturing us or trading in types; he is taking us by sensory surprise, and the tale that he tells is funny, forward, and sometimes woundingly sad. When a character dies, we are granted a tender closeup of the fingers being ritually washed, as if to remind us that not every ancient custom is oppressive. If I had to con-

 ILLUSTRATION BY AVINASH WEERASEKERA

dense the movie into a single image, I would pick the surreal sight—it could have been devised by Jacques Tati—of Haider riding his moped, at night, while carrying a giant cutout of Biba, maybe twelve feet high. He is haplessly devoted to her.

Had "Joyland" been produced in Hollywood, or Bollywood, we'd know how it would end: with a stirring musical number that would soothe all enmities and harmonize hearts. This is not such a movie. The yearnings are left to hang fire, and the ardor of the main romance consumes only part of the action; with a democratic generosity, Sadiq finds ample room for the supporting figures—for the forsaken Mumtaz, say, who is aroused by spying through binoculars on a man in the alleyway outside. The angriest speech is delivered by Nucchi, her sister-in-law ("I don't *want* to calm down"), and the most mournful one by a kindly neighbor, Fayyaz (Sania Saeed), after she commits the cardinal sin of staying overnight to care for Abba, who can't look after himself. "I'm old, almost a ghost now," Fayyaz says. "I'm really not of any use anymore." The beauty of "Joyland" is that it proves her wrong. Everyone here has a purpose, and a claim upon our attention. Nobody is banished from the dance.

Moviegoers haven't seen enough, or heard enough, of Thomas Haden Church in recent years. His voice, redolent of bourbon and cheroots, is a gruff music to the ears, though the gruffness isn't always benign; it can harbor desperation, too, and occasional barks of threat. He would make a disturbing Father Christmas, and his latest role is one of his most fitting. He plays Loyd, the distracted hero of Alex Lehmann's "Acidman," who lives in the woods, alone but for a dog, and looks to the heavens above.

Loyd, though tall and strong, is not in great shape. He wears dirty overalls, and his chin and throat are a scrubland of untended whiskers. He used to be an engineer. He had a family, too, but walked out on them long ago. Now he fiddles with electronic equipment, creating squalls of distorted sound. The word "Acidman" is sprayed in orange paint on the side of his secluded shack, courtesy of local louts, but Loyd contents himself with smoking weed in the back of his pickup. His serious highs exist on another plane. He spends his days and nights—and, best of all, the pearly in-between times, when the horizon is blue and rose—observing glints of light in the sky, and replying in flashes of Morse code. Those glints, in his trusting eyes, are sent by folks of a friendly persuasion:

> They're out there travelling the galaxy, they're looking at hundreds of worlds, and they still come here to check on *our* planet, to make sure *we're* OK.

That is what he says to his daughter, Maggie (Dianna Agron), who, after a difficult search, has tracked him down, journeying two thousand miles—not galactically far, but quite a hike—and arriving at his door. "How long were you planning on staying?" he inquires.

We can guess where the story is heading. Accounts of children reconnecting with estranged and grouchy parents are hardly thin on the ground. But "Acidman," which Lehmann wrote with Chris Dowling, adds two variations to the theme. First, Maggie reveals that she has, if only temporarily, fled from a marriage, and her dread is that she may be doomed to follow in her father's errant footsteps. Second, her reaching out to him, though handled with finesse, is genuinely subordinate to the contact that Loyd craves with the visitors from beyond—of whom, I hasten to add, we receive not a glimpse. In short, this film is what would remain if you deleted all the spaceships from "Close Encounters of the Third Kind": the tale of a once ordinary man beset by an unworldly thirst that he can neither explain nor quench.

Richard Dreyfuss, in Spielberg's film, expressed that thirst with a gulping breathlessness. Haden Church, for his part, goes the other way. His speech keeps failing, mid-conversation; his attention visibly drifts; and his gaze strays upward, as if to distant hills. Loyd may well be losing his mind, as Maggie fears; he is certainly locking it onto things that she cannot imagine. Is this what becomes of the religious impulse when faith decays? It's no shock to learn that Loyd's father was a Methodist preacher. The most beguiling detail in this modest work is the idea that responding to U.F.O.s, and to the aliens who pilot them, is a matter of common courtesy. As Loyd says to Maggie, "It would be *rude* not to acknowledge their presence." He has, he believes, "an obligation to say thank you." After watching "Acidman," I think rather less of E.T. He didn't even ask if he could use the phone. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Robert Leighton, must be received by Sunday, April 9th. The finalists in the March 27th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 24th & May 1st issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



" "

....

THE FINALISTS



"I'll be back in a sec."
Kari Woodward, Washington, D.C.

"Am I catching you at a bad time?"
Carol Lasky, Boston, Mass.

"I don't usually pick up men this way."
Gary Borislow, Johns Creek, Ga.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Nothing has sold yet, but we've gotten a few nibbles."
Doug Finkelstein, Redondo Beach, Calif.



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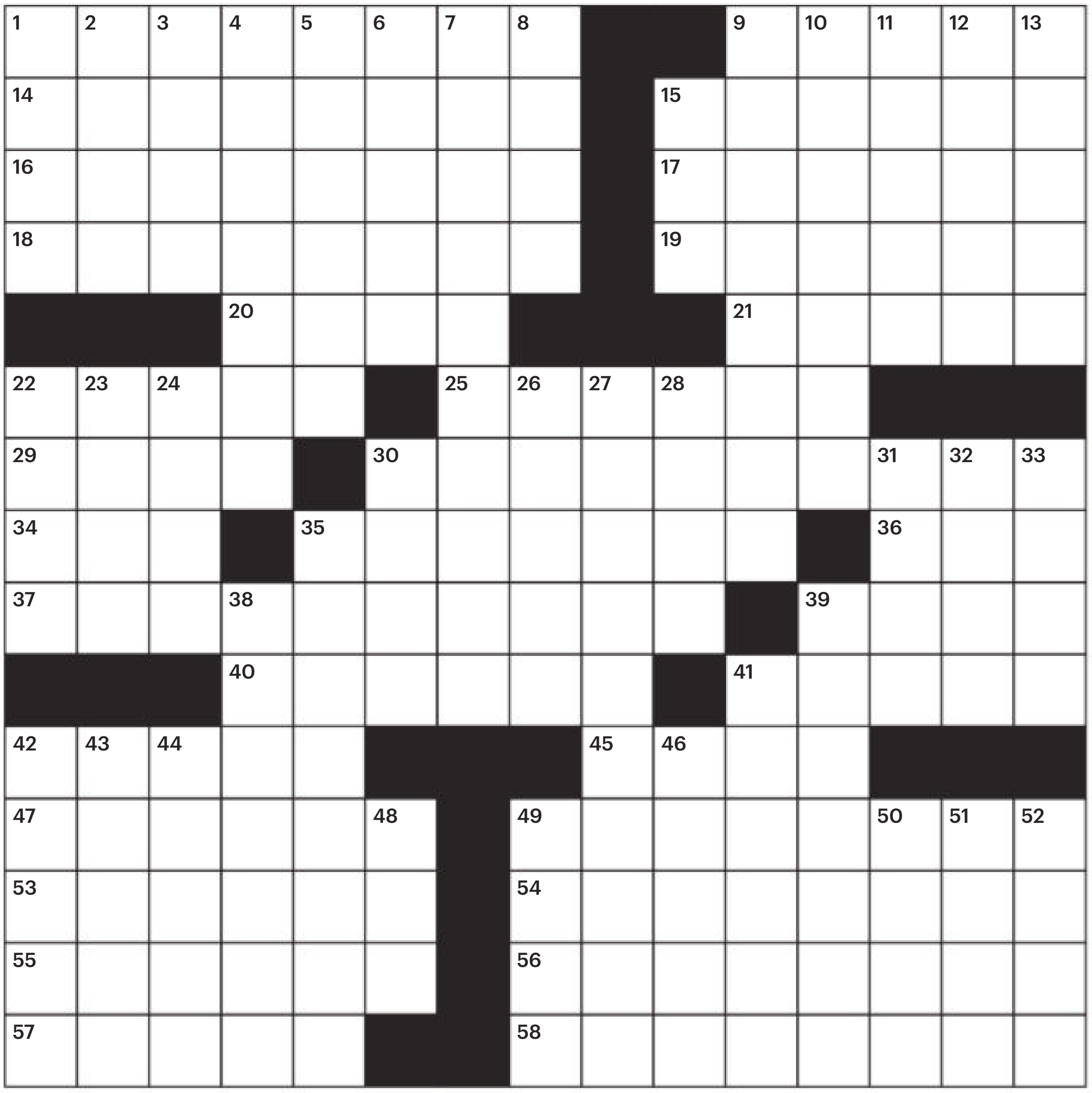
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PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY ANNA SHECHTMAN



ACROSS

1 Action that's illegal in basketball unless the ball touches the backboard, the hoop, or another player first
9 Host's task
14 "It seems to me . . ."
15 Jet Ski competitor
16 Subject of interest for a Rhodes scholar?
17 Gummy-bear brand
18 Type of auto inspection that measures emissions
19 Innumerable
20 "___ life!"
21 Hearts and spades, for two
22 "The conscience of the city," per "Les Misérables"
25 Pet rodent, perhaps
29 Mustache makeup
30 They're good to have in case of breakdowns
34 "Oh, no!"
35 "The Matrix" symbol co-opted by the alt-right
36 Ena in "Bambi," e.g.
37 Don DeLillo novel whose original dust jacket touted it as "a brilliant story about death and the fear of death . . . a comedy, of course"
39 First of four rhyming letters
40 Zenith
41 Phony
42 One bit
45 Detriment
47 Anne of "Anne of the Thousand Days"
49 Nonpareil
53 Marginal
54 Rosary recitation
55 Like many newly retired champion racehorses
56 Program used for some Twitter apologies
57 Ross of vexillological renown
58 Summery brews

DOWN

1 Lets loose (on)
2 Biblical kingdom near Moab
3 Schifrin who composed the "Mission: Impossible" theme
4 "The arcade game with the most ways to die," per a 1982 review
5 Annoy constantly
6 Strength
7 Dachshund, colloquially
8 Part of TBS: Abbr.
9 Teen-drama archetype
10 Show whose hosts once got a call asking for advice on winterizing a Mars rover
11 It may get lost in translation
12 Title holder
13 Commodities
15 Moo ___
22 Playwright whom Jacques Barzun called "perhaps the most consciously conscious mind that has ever thought"
23 Per unit
24 Collaborative resource
26 Silas Marner's adopted daughter
27 Create a scene
28 Acrimony
30 Successor of Barr as Attorney General
31 When "Et tu, Brute?" is asked, in "Julius Caesar"
32 Bag that may be swag
33 Scorch
35 First responder, often?
38 They're showcased in showcases
39 Braggadocio
41 Like many college students taking orgo
42 Classic Britcom based on a sketch called "Modern Mother and Daughter," familiarly
43 Bakery-case centerpiece
44 Most wanted?
46 Sum of one's virtues, to the ancient Greeks
48 "Network" Oscar nominee Beatty
49 Bollywood star Mukerji
50 "Dies ___"
51 Kelly with six Daytime Emmys
52 Fist-bumps

Solution to the previous puzzle:

P	A	S	T	S	■	■	■	C	R	O	C	H	E	T
D	R	A	W	U	P	■	■	F	O	R	H	I	R	E
F	E	L	I	C	I	A	■	C	O	S	I	G	N	S
■	W	I	L	H	E	L	M	■	T	O	P	H	A	T
P	E	E	L	■	C	L	A	D	■	■	■	B	U	S
S	O	N	S	■	H	E	T	E	R	O	D	O	X	■
A	N	T	■	S	A	Y	S	S	O	R	R	Y	■	■
■	■	■	T	H	R	O	U	P	L	E	S	■	■	■
■	■	T	E	E	T	O	T	A	L	S	■	L	P	S
■	H	O	L	D	S	P	A	C	E	■	S	A	L	E
S	E	N	■	■	■	S	K	I	D	■	C	H	A	T
T	R	O	U	P	E	■	E	T	O	N	I	A	N	■
U	B	E	R	I	Z	E	■	O	U	C	H	I	E	S
F	I	N	G	E	R	S	■	■	T	A	U	N	T	S
F	E	D	E	R	A	L	■	■	■	A	B	A	S	E

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